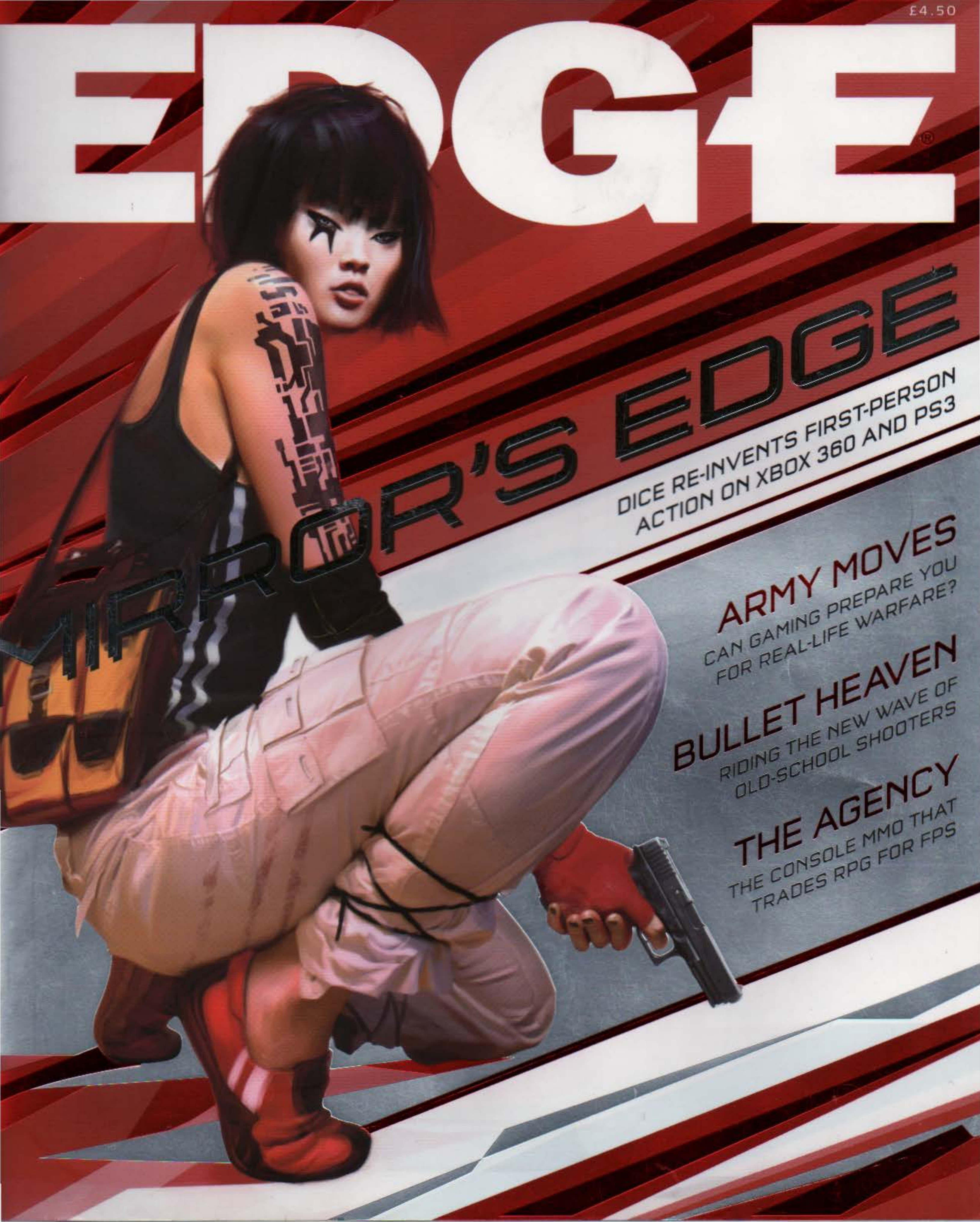

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PASSPORT



This month we were reminded of the gaming sessions we used to have, some years ago, playing N64 FPS *GoldenEye 007* at an ex-**Edge** staffer's house. Joining in these sessions was his 13-year-old brother, and together we would play the game's multiplayer mode until we could bear being taken down by his bullets no more. These weren't the type of anything-goes kills that would typify our own performances, but single, clinical pops to the skull. We hadn't previously seen skills such as these applied to a console FPS, and everyone was appropriately impressed. (And no, not at all irritated, of course.)

Some years later, the brother decided to embark on a career in the Army, which required an entry test that involved a shooting range. Having never before held a firearm in real life, he proceeded to record the highest mark in the test facility's history. Was it the *GoldenEye* 'training'? It's certainly difficult to see how it could have hindered his chances, and it's something worth keeping in mind as you read this month's article on the military landscape and its parallels with the world of gaming (see p78).

Getting back to more traditional territory for this magazine, we also take the first look at *Mirror's Edge* (p54), a firstperson-viewed action title from *Battlefield* series developer DICE. The game won't be finished for some time yet, but, as you'll see, it's taking some audacious steps in an attempt to overhaul what has become another mechanically predictable genre.

We've recently been shown some more genre overhauls that will be revealed to the wider world at E3 this month. More on those next issue. Until then, the simpler pleasures of *Geometry Wars Galaxies* (p36) and *Super Stardust HD* (p94) await.



EDGE

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"I swear I will not kill anyone."







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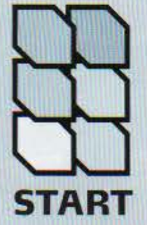
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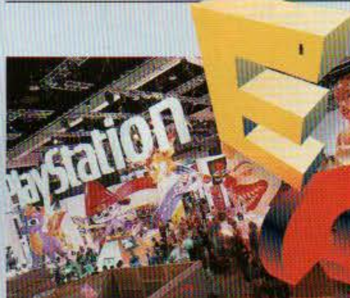


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INDUSTRY

E3 prepares for a new beginning

What does the restyled industry showcase mean for the way games are presented?



Since its inception in 1995, the Electronic Entertainment Expo (aka E3) has been the focal point of the videogame industry's calendar, providing the platform for most hardware and big-name software unveilings since. This year's event will be a more conservative one



E3's death, and rebirth as a smaller-scale event, has thrown the industry's marketing machine into a state of confusion. The new E3 is still very much an unknown quantity, and the uncertainty over how significant it will prove to be is causing some dysfunction among the publishing houses that would choose to attend it.

For many years the focal point of the gaming industry's calendar, E3 was a victim of its own success, becoming ever-more bloated, ever-more lavish – ultimately expiring under the weight of its own hedonistic wads of cash. Although this extravagance may have been an efficient way of demonstrating to the world at large the increasing economic significance of the videogame industry, it was ultimately paid for from the pockets of a smaller number of companies, whose direct benefit was difficult to ascertain.

It wasn't a tenable situation. Developers crunched to meet E3's demands every year, and despite their efforts had no guarantee that they might make enough noise to be distinguished from the throng. With some parts of the press artificially elevating single products and companies as 'winners' in an event that was too unwieldy to fairly assess, they ultimately created further reasons for many companies to turn their back on the event. As soon as a quartet of majors pulled out in the form of Nintendo, Microsoft, SCEA and EA, E3's life signs began to falter.

Now, E3 has clawed its way back out of the grave, and its new form, making the move from





the Los Angeles Convention Centre to a number of locations around Santa Monica – from an aircraft hangar to hotel suites – promises to be a smaller affair with a more sober, businesslike approach. Now an invite-only event, some attention has shifted elsewhere, but E3 still promises an opportunity to demonstrate products to press and investors that publishers are unwilling to relinquish.

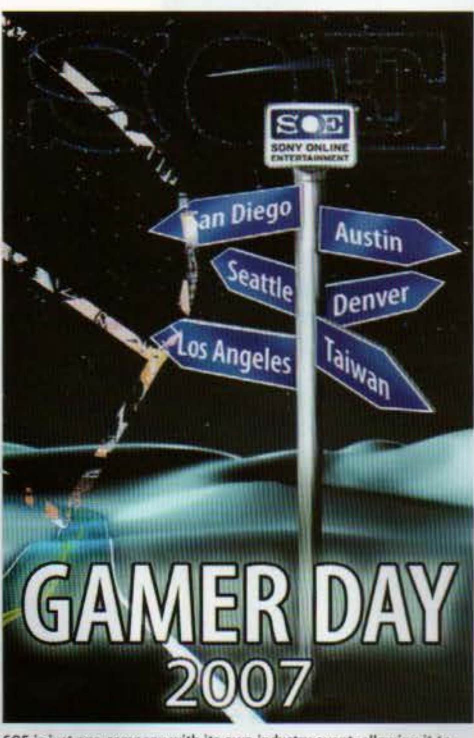
"We sincerely hope the new E3 is effective for us and that we are able to meet with as much or more of the media and our retailers as ever, but we will not know the true ramifications until we get underway," a Sony Online Entertainment staffer says when asked about the repercussions of E3's downsizing. "We were not among the publishers who threw massive media events or parties, so for us E3 was and still is an opportunity to present and discuss our games. We have no idea how this year's show will go, but we are not taking it lightly."

The difficulty in assessing the new E3 has implications that extend beyond its own success or failure, however. With neither organisers nor exhibitors entirely sure of the degree of exposure E3 will afford, the line-up for single-publisher trade events occurring in spring and early summer has been confused. Such initiatives have been growing in significance for a number of years now, and were no doubt some of the larger nails in E3's coffin. With E3 as we knew it gone, not only is there more focus on these other events by default, but publishers have found themselves with more cash to pour into their own, more targeted marketing gestures. SOE has its Gamer Days, Ubisoft has Ubidays, EA has EA3, Sega and THQ have partnered up for their own European event, and so the list goes on and will grow in the future.

"The old E3 was extremely expensive," says SOE's spokesman. "Every year, the booths became more elaborate as publishers competed for



This year the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica takes over from the LA Convention Center as E3's beating heart, and restrictions placed on exhibitors tell their own story: the maximum stand size is 20 square metres, with most companies having only half that



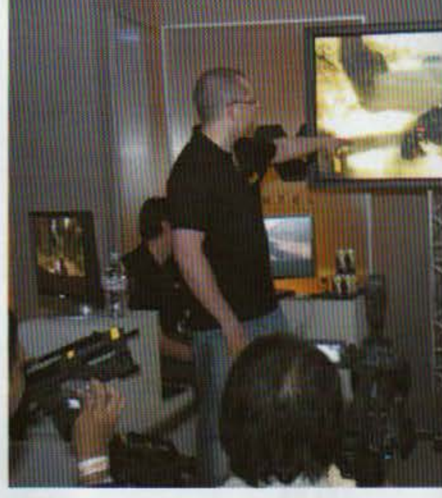
SOE is just one company with its own industry event, allowing it to properly present its wares to the press, but it still has its eye on E3

attention on the floor. But with or without E3, we have always found Gamer Days to be an important part of our overall business, as we can focus the media specifically on our games and our overall company plans."

In theory, the shift of focus on to these events should work better for everyone involved because publishers ensure that their own titles aren't overshadowed by another company's. As SOE points out: "There's only so much reporters and editors can remember about the literally hundreds of games they see at a show like E3." Furthermore, the schedule for single-publisher events can be more easily flexed to offer reasonable milestones to the developers on show. The press should also benefit, given more time with each individual title.

"The old E3 was extremely expensive. And there's only so much reporters and editors can remember about the literally hundreds of games they see at a show like E3"

At least that's how it's meant to work. If, however, the experiences of the recent spate of single-publisher events are anything to go by, their sudden growth spurt has been premature. With the shape of E3 still uncertain, the hole it has left in the PR calendar is difficult to describe. On the most basic level, publishers are uncertain of what they can show off in their own events in order to leave something over for the potential limelight of E3. The results of this confusion are epitomised by bombastic displays like Ubisoft's glitzy Parisian organisational nightmare, Ubidays '07. Taking place in the expansive conference facilities of the Carrousel du Louvre, the event expended a lot of effort and money on recreating the extravagance of E3, but ended up holding back on content. It was an odd contradiction: despite its opportunity for focus on the Ubisoft brand, there was little new





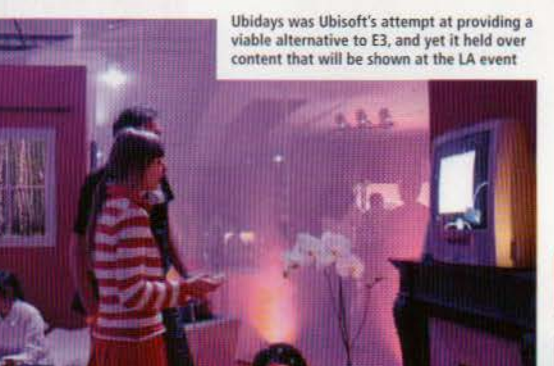
revealed about its foremost titles. Although Ubidays offered the chance for the rest of the world's press to catch up with the likes of *Haze* and *Splinter Cell: Conviction* (see **E**176), there was very little else on offer. Of the news that was genuinely new, the announcement of a Beowulf game to complement Robert Zemeckis' upcoming film was probably the most headline-grabbing. Although, other than mentioning that Britain's most significant surviving literary work of the early Middle Ages would "reinvent the hack and slash genre," Ubisoft's executive director of EMEA territories, **Alain Corre**, had little else to say on the matter.

In fact, the glossy vacuity of the event rather puts a lie to the dismissive comments made by Ubisoft's CEO, **Yves Guillemot**, about the new form E3 is taking: "E3 is now only for the US. We wanted to do something to help everybody see our products. So we decided to do E3 but in France and call it Ubidays."

Yet the demonstration of *Tom Clancy's EndWar* at Ubidays was limited to some new prerendered footage, while *Assassin's Creed* could offer only a new trailer and promises of a hands-on demo in July. Despite Guillemot's bluster about E3's decreased significance, it seems like it will be at E3 that these games are properly revealed.

EA, meanwhile, held its own event in June, and the company has been openly more upbeat about the prospect of attending the newer, smaller E3. "E3 was a successful industry event and was instrumental in raising the visibility of our industry," says **Jeff Brown**, EA's vice president of corporate communications. "As a result of its success, it became very large and sometimes unwieldy for media and industry representatives to navigate. The new, smaller focus will help the show concentrate on the essentials of getting the key business done. A smaller show means exhibitors can focus more





Ubidays was Ubisoft's attempt at providing a viable alternative to E3, and yet it held over content that will be shown at the LA event





Ubidays' location didn't lack glamour (far left), but with nothing playable for the likes of *Assassin's Creed* (left), some journos were left with little to phone in to their offices

deeply on a more select set of products. That's a good format for visitors to spend time meeting and interacting with some of the most anticipated game offerings."

Although EA3's line-up was a fulsome one, Brown is more cagey on exactly how EA's presence at E3 would differ from its earlier single-publisher event, stating blandly: "Visitors will see a selection of our summer and holiday releases as well as a look at some new properties."

The issue of content, however, is not just the only thing that publishers are struggling to address in their own tradeshows. Qualitatively, these events have also seen a shift to compensate for E3's loss as an access point for the world's mainstream media into what is often erroneously sidelined as a niche industry. E3 was, for many years, the one game industry event that could be guaranteed to make it into non-specialist press. As such it was a glamorous, glitzy affair, designed to demonstrate to retailers, investors and people generally distanced from the workings of the industry that there was a huge amount of money being splashed around; that the industry was full of opportunity and growth. It's this peacock-like behaviour that has found its way into most single-publisher events, and perhaps, in this regard, Ubidays was successful – it may well have wowed with its celebrity and sumptuous displays of affluence.

At the same time, however, this is all counter-productive: such swaggering does not foster intimate engagement with the games attendees have travelled to see and play. Furthermore, it can hardly be a sensible economic strategy for the industry, finally unburdened from the commitment to E3's insane profligacy, to then recreate this situation for individual publishers. In fact, smaller publishers not willing or simply unable to replicate the type of spectacle associated with E3 of old in their own events may well be faced with a bigger impact on their wallets than before, now having to attend a larger number of separate events.

"The new E3 is significantly downsized in scope and cost, but it will still be more expensive than our own Gamers Day budgets," says our man at SOE. "We may end up having to allot more budget to more events and travel worldwide to make up for a lack of one all-encompassing trade show."

Perhaps E3, for all its flaws and expense, actually held in check the kind of publicity arms race we're now seeing among individual publishers. Certainly the fallout of the new E3, which takes place on July 10-13, will shape the way games are marketed for the years to come. Success, and the precedent set by Ubidays will continue – keeping spring and early summer for displays of their feathers while E3 remains a significant mark on the calendar for hands-on demonstrations and incidental industry news. Failure, and it could mean that publishers reassess their offerings – asking whether a total bifurcation of content and ostentation is worth pursuing given that it is then a long wait until Liepzig, the next big industry date (and a date which, buyers have said, is simply too late in the calendar to be of use in the crucial process of setting out projections for the all-important winter holiday selling season).

Amid all the uncertainty, it is clear that E3 2007 will at least remain home to the long established three-way battle between the press conferences of Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft, each company desperate to be the one with the most convincing-looking sales graphs, the one able to drop the biggest bomb, and, ultimately, the one about which most words will be written when the show is over.





Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot (left) suggests that E3 is now no longer an international concern, and relevant only to the American market. The company's Alain Corre (right) was on hand at Ubidays to make the event's biggest announcement, concerning film licence *Beowulf*

MEDIA

Competitive gaming antes up

Play for pay or just prove who's the best in front of the world as gaming gets televised



Gears Of War is proving a popular online title, although not popular enough to knock *Halo 2* from its throne. Using the pistol is definitely not 'going easy' on anyone, however

Competitive gaming is nothing new: from the earliest spaceship simulator, 1962's *Spacewar*, to *Halo*, videogames have been synonymous with human competition. As the industry has grown and become more moneyed, there has been an inevitable osmosis with traditional competitive activities such as sports and casinos and their global infrastructure. And so the phrase 'I can definitely beat you' has inevitably led to 'I'll bet you £5 I can beat you' and 'I'll beat you in front of an audience'.

The two newest products of this process are Skillground and xleague.tv – the former an online forum for playing and betting on games, the latter an integrated satellite television channel and website devoted to the competitive aspect of videogaming. Neither is the first example of their type, but both are bringing a professional approach that has perhaps been missing from past examples.

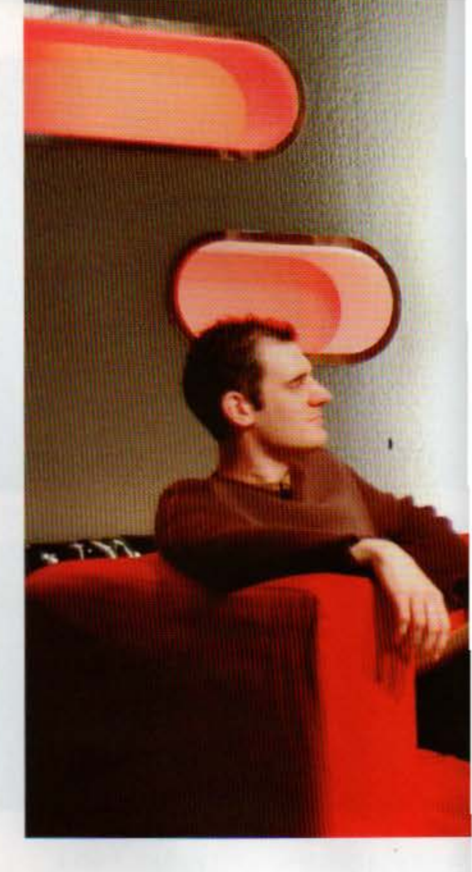
The likes of pogo.com and gorillagamer have been offering betting as well as cash prizes for gaming skill, but Skillground is perhaps the first competitive site looking to take videogames beyond the pro/noob dichotomy that defines online gaming. Videogame sites tend to show that there's money to be made in the specialist market – ie, the best players – but the models of casino and poker websites indicate there is a mass market for online gaming. If Skillground is to manage this then its priority has to be fair play: the ranking system and bespoke games are specifically designed to match players of the same level and identify the inevitable attempts at hustling. The entire infrastructure is dedicated to detecting cheating and, if nothing else, the ability to have a disputed game replayed in its entirety and watched by a member of Skillground staff will bring much peace of mind.

It's easy to sneer at games designed for an online money-making venture, but Skillground's environment may give a new lease of life to relatively standard titles





Both Skillground and xleague.tv bring a level of sheen and accessibility to competitive gaming that has rarely been seen outside of organised events like the Esports World Cup



It's easy to sneer at games designed specifically for an online money-making venture, but Skillground's environment may give a new lease of life to relatively standard titles. The firstperson shooter *Warpath*, for example, has been tailored from its unspectacular but solid PC original by Digital Extremes (the team behind *Unreal Tournament* and the forthcoming *Dark Sector*), while the fighter *Close Quarters Combat* boasts developers from the team responsible for *The Warriors* at Rockstar. Perhaps surprisingly, it's promised that all future games will be original IP, though the most unusual thing about the service is that it has launched without *Ultimate Tour Golf*, a sports game with a simplistic interface that may have been the best bet to deliver on Skillground's aim of a mass game-betting hub.

From one angle, it's disappointing that a site with such mainstream aims has chosen to launch with what can only be described as hardcore gaming genres. From another, that in itself is an inevitable part of a wide appeal, and *Ultimate Tour Golf* is at least on the way to redressing the balance. Whether Skillground's decision to concentrate on original titles rather than established consumer titles is the right one remains to be seen, but betting on games may one day be as much a part of life as fluttering on the horses, so a site that offers users the games for free as well as incentives other than money (collecting experience and skill points can be exchanged for various rewards on the site) is only a progression.

The other side of competitive gaming is xleague.tv, which distinguishes itself from most other gaming television in the professionalism of its approach, from the easy studio atmosphere to the on-the-fly coverage of major events such as the









The publicity shots of xleague.tv competitors, along with the trailers between televised matches, often depict gamers as dour and smartly dressed – quite a break from the norm

PlayStation 3 launch. Good television programmes about gaming have always been thin on the ground, and the time may be ripe for a new player: the advent of broadband, more than anything else, has led to the rise of social gaming and a very big potential audience.

The Match, xleague.tv's flagship programme, concentrates on the higher standard of players from its invitational tournaments, and features popular console games from *Halo 2* to *MotorStorm* and *FIFA '07*. As the title implies, the game is treated like a sports event, with studio analysis before, during, and after the event as well as commentary during the action. The standard of the latter varies according to game, but can occasionally leave a little to be desired, with commentators betraying an overly general knowledge of titles that require in-depth understanding due to their higher levels of tactical play (consider the assumption that a player using the pistol in *Gears Of War* was "going easy on the other team," for example). But The Match deserves hardcore credit for showing lengthy competitions, with its *Halo 2* invitational taking place over two hours and a series of ten-minute rounds, featuring a good level of insight into each of the respective maps between rounds as well as an informative commentary.

Probably the weakest aspect of xleague.tv is its review content, which, thanks to factual errors and presentational issues, has a thrown-together kind of style that is at odds with the other programming that surrounds it. There is a certain charm to one commentator talking about *Gears Of War*'s architectural excesses while the others boast about how they'll kill him as he's admiring the view, but content like "How hard can it be to make a golf game?" and complaints about being beaten "by a girl" because of automatic club selection in *Tiger Woods '07* suggest that this is one area where xleague.tv falls into the worst kind of stereotypes.

However, xleague.tv does so much right that it's hard not to see these problems being ironed out. In particular, its acceptance of user-generated content as a crucial part of the wider community, and a mature treatment of the competitive element in gaming, should see it win an audience.

Skillground and xleague.tv are very different propositions focusing on the same aspect of gaming: competition. Both do certain things very well, and both are perhaps still a little anchored by some traditional notions of what competitive gaming should be. But as the beginnings of what will eventually be an explosion, the priorities are well-chosen, and look a solid basis for going forward in their respective fields. Though hardly altruistic, in different ways they both ensure that the most important aspect of competitive gaming – fairness – is upheld.

Newswire



Bat sense

Bill Gates dropped hints this month at the D5 executive conference that Microsoft would be looking to explore new ways of interpreting player input. Sharing the stage with Apple CEO Steve Jobs, Gates suggested that games of the future would be controlled by visual analysis of the player's movements.

"Imagine a game machine where you're just going to pick up the bat or the tennis racquet and swing it," he said, prompting retorts that Nintendo's Wii already fulfilled this role. "No, that's not it," said Gates. "That's a 3D positional device. This is video recognition."

Could the next revolution in post-Wii pointing devices be that we no longer need one at all? Or, indeed, has PlayStation Eye got there already?



According to De Plater, *EndWar* is in a playable state already: "We've done a lot of iterations with playtesting. All the voice commands and controls are good"

SOUND BYTES

"It's funny – if 'funny' is the right word, which it isn't. They paint Steve [Wiebe] as the family man and I guess they paint me as a son of a gun."
Arcade champion **Billy Mitchell** talks to MTV.com about his negative portrayal in King Of Kong, a documentary about *Donkey Kong* high scores

"We don't disclose the actual number." "We don't comment on that." "We don't talk about our production."
Microsoft gaming hardware head **Todd Holmdahl** remains tight-lipped on the subject of Xbox 360 defects

"Here I am, a self-employed writer, and I never had time for my family because I had this GAME that was waiting to seduce me whenever I pretended I was going to the office to work. I estimate there are about 20 novels that were never written because of computer games."
Author **Orson Scott-Card** on why he went cold turkey on his *Civ 2* addiction

"We do not accept that there is any connection between contemporary issues of 21st century Manchester and a work of science fiction in which a fictitious 1950s Britain is under attack by aliens."
Sony explores issues of reality and fantasy with the Very Reverend Rogers Govender, Dean of Manchester Cathedral

Voice of command

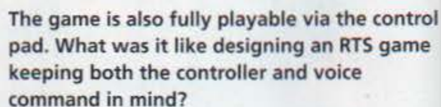
Despite the absence of a hands-on demonstration at Ubidays, EndWar's global ambitions still thrill

Along with having the heft of the Tom Clancy brand, upcoming RTS *EndWar* has a fair few innovations behind it. Being a title developed exclusively for consoles, the introduction of voice command hopes to avoid the usual genre problems with cumbersome gamepad controls. Then there's the multiplayer game, with its massive persistent global campaign. But how does it all fit together, and, well, will it work? Ubisoft Shanghai's creative director and RTS legend **Michael De Plater** (right) sat down with us to fill in the gaps made by the game's non-appearance at Ubidays.

Voice control for RTS games has been in the offing for a while. Why has it only become workable now?

When we first started to look into voice command, *SOCOM* was the benchmark. There are two things that enable us to go beyond that. Firstly, the middleware we're using has advanced in the last five years, so the quality of recognition is higher. Secondly, a lot of the quality of recognition comes down to how much processing power you are able to dedicate to it, and with a 360 you can dedicate more than was previously possible. But there's another part to it, too: to make voice command effective enough for you to take on the role of a general, we have to enable you to give high-level commands to your units and have them be intelligent enough to behave as soldiers would in that situation, and carry out those commands. Voice command isn't really used for micro-management, but you can say things like, "Red team, defend objective Zulu," and they're smart enough to go over there, get into defensive positions, find appropriate cover, enter buildings and take up sniper positions.

"We took the strategic features and interface conventions of tactical shooters, and built that to a scale where it is actually like a war – so it's not 20 guys on a battlefield but 1,000 guys"



The game is also fully playable via the control pad. What was it like designing an RTS game keeping both the controller and voice command in mind?

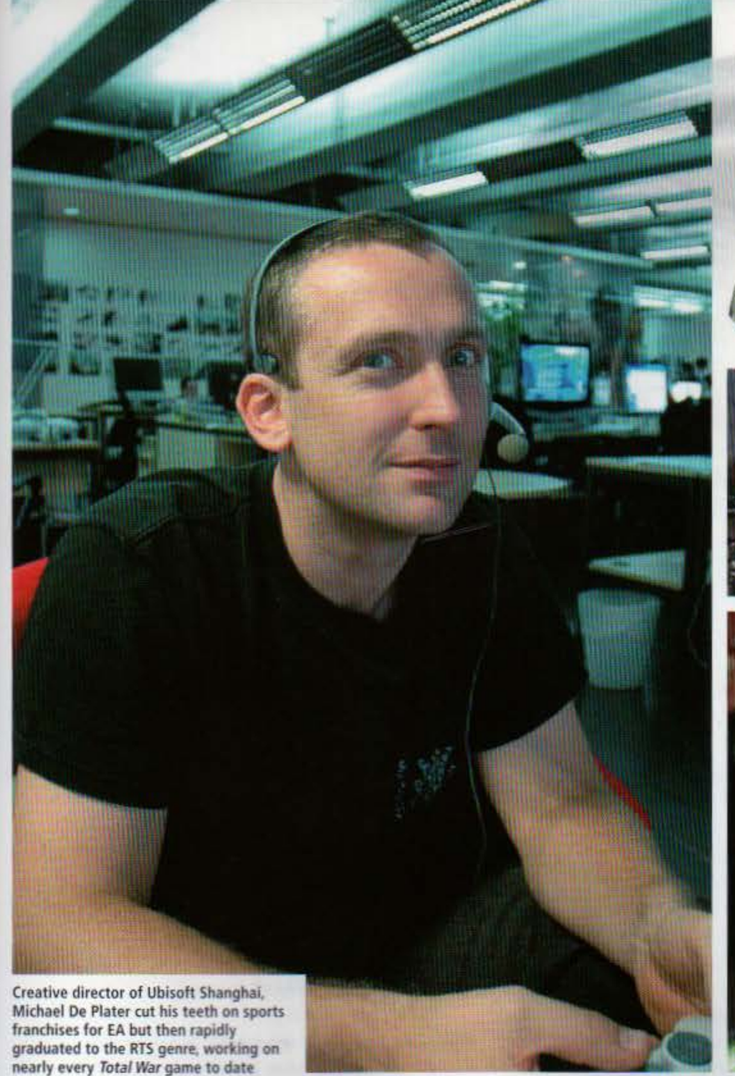
We started by looking at console UI conventions, sports games and tactical shooters, and built a strategy game from that foundation, rather than looking at PC strategy games and thinking how to get that on to console. In the last few years, pretty much all of the innovations in the shooter genre have been made by adding elements of strategy. *Battlefield* was a big innovator in terms of putting a command mode in; it gave you strategic objectives to capture; it let you control a combined arms force – helicopters, tanks, and so on. All of these are traditionally strategy game features. *Ghost Recon*, *Brothers In Arms* and so on all brought a tactical dimension to the gameplay – you'd give squadmates orders in order to flank your enemies. So we basically took that sweep of features, the strategic features and interface conventions of tactical shooters, and built that to a scale where it is actually like a war – so it's not 20 or 30 guys on a battlefield but 1,000 guys. But anyone who's given an order to a squadmate in *Ghost Recon* can pick up and play our game instantly.

What are the major differences in single- and multiplayer modes in terms of how you have to plan your overall strategy using the Risk-like world map?

In singleplayer the world map acts as a meta-campaign, turn by turn, choosing where you want to fight. The key thing is, unlike Risk or *Total War*, you don't have to fight each battle. In each turn it's up to you to choose which battle you want to fight. So if there's a frontline with eight battles, you only choose to play the one you think you'll be able to do the best at given the units at your disposal, or the one which will have the most influence on the greater war. The presentation of the massively multiplayer game looks exactly the same; the only difference is that everyone around the world is making that same decision in parallel and



Among the ways in which *EndWar* differentiates itself from other RTS games is its camera: as in squad shooters, the viewpoint gets in low, at the level of the troops



Creative director of Ubisoft Shanghai, Michael De Plater cut his teeth on sports franchises for EA but then rapidly graduated to the RTS genre, working on nearly every *Total War* game to date





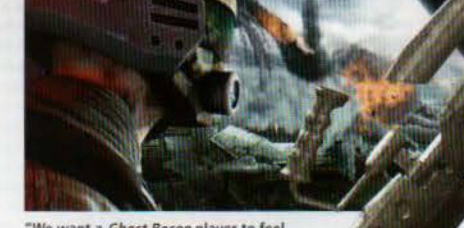
everybody's results are being accumulated in order to update the global status of the war at the end of the day.

How does persistence work in multiplayer? Obviously the conflict persists from battle to battle, but what about your troops?
Once you've chosen a faction, you keep that army, so each individual platoon of soldiers that survives battle to battle accumulates experience. They have a name, a commander, and there are about 400 upgrades you can buy in the game, so you customise, upgrade and personalise your army. You are able to choose their insignia, their mottos, the camouflage patterns, and really make it your own. It is your character.

What drove the decision to have Europe, the US and Russia as the three playable factions?
We wanted people to play as their own nationality – so that's a big part of the choice of selecting Europe. The other thing is we wanted the warfare to be symmetrical and our combatants to be well matched, so we had to ask who has the world's most elite forces, who has the most interesting soldiers, hardware and technology to play with. And the answer is that the European defence industry, America and Russia have the best 21st century war machines. The other big part of our story is the resurgence of Russia. In a world of declining oil, Russia's the place with the greatest remaining reserves, and it becomes incredibly rich. That wealth gets reinvested into renewed imperial ambitions. All of which is happening now.

So, Asia, Africa and the Middle East don't get involved in World War III?
Well, it is a massive global war. When it comes to do a sequel, we won't be inventing World War IV – it's momentous enough that you can look at it from the view of different superpowers or whatever. This game is just the Atlantic theatre.

Isn't it a paradox to have an *EndWar 2*?
World War I was the war to end all wars, the Napoleonic War was called the war to end all wars, and I think the Romans called the Punic War the war to end all war, too. So our game is the next in a long line!



"We want a *Ghost Recon* player to feel instantly familiar in our world," says De Plater. "You just have many more units"





The ring of ire

The flames get higher around Microsoft as 360 reliability comes under the spotlight

The 'red ring of death' problem has been present since the launch of Microsoft's Xbox 360, but in the last few months it has been gathering pace, and collective internet fury, at a rate that has caused widespread concern about the console. No official figures exist for the failure rate of the hardware, however, although Microsoft has ceased using its initial claim that 'it is within the industry standard of three to five per cent'. Importantly, it denies that there is a systemic problem with the hardware, claiming that 'each incident is unique and customer enquiries are handled on a case-by-case basis'.

Microsoft denies that there is a systemic problem with Xbox 360 hardware, claiming that 'each incident is unique and customer inquiries are handled on a case-by-case basis'

In the absence of an official line, customers are being forced to explore problems themselves, but surveys organised by two gaming websites, in which over 60 per cent and 45 per cent of respondents respectively reported at least one failed 360, are self-selecting and can't be taken as evidence in any quantitative sense. What is interesting, however, is the qualitative data showing that as many people report multiple hardware failures as individual cases: whatever the problem with the hardware, Microsoft is charging out-of-warranty customers for the privilege of fixing it despite there appearing to be no sure-fire method of delivering a long-term fix.

The problems don't end when gamers finally have a working 360 again: any downloaded games will transfer with your Gamertag to a new machine, but will require a constant link to Xbox Live to be playable. Microsoft has taken no official steps towards remedying this, and its official help page simply instructs users to stay connected. Its official forums are little better, with moderators simply instructing customers to call the helpline, and those same customers reporting back that they received no help. It appears that Microsoft *has* transferred MS points to new Gamertags, but only after a significant amount of consumer hassle.

The Guardian newspaper, the BBC's Watchdog programme and more gaming websites and forums than can be counted on the fingers of both hands have featured the 'red ring of death' story in recent weeks, but Microsoft also faces more formal interest in its console hardware: Meglena Kuneva, the European Commissioner for Consumer Protection, has demanded an answer regarding the perceived problem of disc-scratching. According to the EU website, 'Commissioner Kuneva confirmed that she had written to Microsoft to ask for more information concerning:

Diarmid Andrews, director, GT Electronics

Microsoft remains the most tight-lipped of companies about the 360 failure rate, only releasing an identikit statement in response to all enquiries insisting that 'the majority of consumers are having a first-class experience'. We asked Diarmid Andrews, the director of GT Electronics, a specialist in Xbox 360 repairs, about the problem.



Microsoft is continuing with its refusal to make official comment on the Xbox 360 failure rate, but denies that it's a systemic problem. In your experience, is there a common fault, and what do you think could be done to fix it?
The main problem is the graphics processor. It can't cool itself properly – it gets too hot and melts the solder that's holding it in place. That's when you get the three red lights. The CPU has a good heatsink and it's fine. The 360's a sleek machine – the DVD-ROM sits right back on the GPU and the heatsink is really quite small. It could use a fan. I feel a bit sorry for Microsoft because I repair a lot of Sony's machines as well, but they don't get nearly as much criticism.

"How many people do you know who haven't had their 360 go wrong? Microsoft have said that it's three to five per cent? No, I don't think so – I think you're talking much higher numbers. We repair huge amounts"

Can external thirdparty fans that clip on to the rear of the console help to fix the problem?
Not really. The fans that go on the back only go on top of the ventilation that's already there, so they're pulling out hot air from there rather than cooling anything. It needs something like a CPU fan on a PC – that would be ideal and probably solve the problems. But there's just not adequate ventilation. The GPU is basically sitting on 400 little balls of solder, and that's the connection to the main board. If even one of those balls gets a crack, or it gets loose, you'll get three red lights.

Often there are a few stages in the process, perhaps involving one red light at first, before complete breakdown.
Yes, and unfortunately after you've had that initial problem it'll just get worse. Just stand it on its end and keep it cool is the only advice I could give. But how many people do you know who haven't had their 360 go wrong? Microsoft have said it's three to five per cent? No, I don't think so – I think you're talking much higher numbers. We repair huge amounts, and that takes a lot, because it's a lot of hassle to post off something like the 360.

Is there anything that surprises you about Xbox 360 hardware failure as a whole?
The biggest surprise is that I can't see how Microsoft have changed the design. I've repaired 360s from the two big Christmas 2006 packs – the *Call Of Duty* and the *Gears Of War* packs – and they haven't solved these problems. They say they have, but they haven't. It's annoying because the hardware they use is good – the components are solid, and they have good leads and quality DVD-ROM drives. It's just a badly designed machine with regard to the GPU.


The innards of an Xbox 360. Despite fans and heatsinks that wouldn't disgrace a gaming PC, the neatly packed and otherwise well-designed interior seems to have a problem regulating its temperature. Microsoft refuses to admit that this is a systemic problem

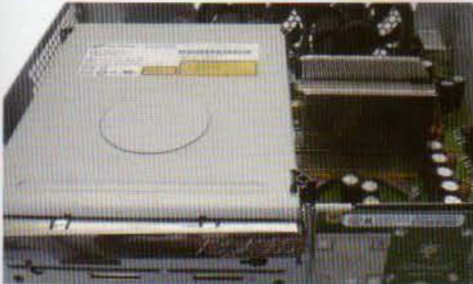
(1) details of the actions Microsoft has taken in The Netherlands to resolve the problems relating to the use of the Xbox [360] there; (2) details of whether the same problem has occurred on other markets.'

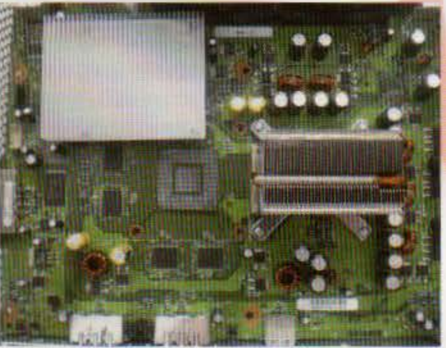
At the time of going to press, reports are emerging suggesting that broken 360s are being repaired by Microsoft-authorised engineers and returned to consumers with an additional GPU heatsink, confirming what many specialists have been saying about the hardware (see interview, below left). So at least something is being done about the problem, although damage limitation may yet force Microsoft to put more effort into customer service before somebody forces it.

We approached Microsoft for official comment on the 360 hardware situation, but it had not replied at the time of going to press.


Solder – all 400 pieces of it – provides the interface for the GPU. Heat can make this soften, leading to a catastrophic malfunction according to those attempting to find a solution to the problem

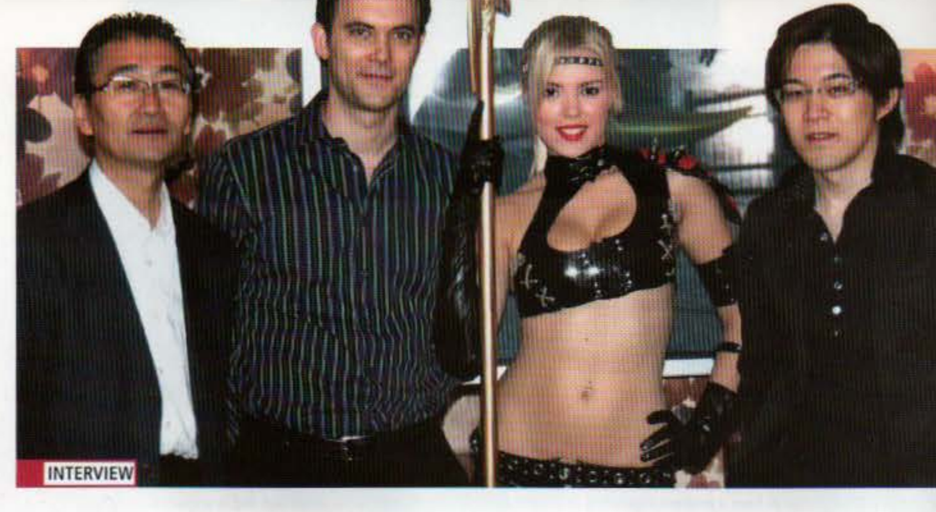



Lifting out the DVD-ROM drive allows access to the GPU nestled cosily underneath. A little too cosily, it seems, as it is the temperature of the graphics chip that is being blamed for the 'three red lights' problem









INTERVIEW

Platform positioning

Ninja Gaiden comes to PlayStation – could Team Ninja's Xbox love be waning?

Billed a 're-mastering', *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* (reviewed on p90) is the second re-release of the 2004 Xbox original, this time on PS3. Studio head Tomonobu Itagaki has always been outspoken on the subject of multiplatform games, claiming that creating multiple versions leads to technical compromises. But with Xbox 360 doing poorly in Japan and PS3 trailing in the west, could this principle be under threat?

We met with *Sigma*'s producer and director, **Yosuke Hayashi**, at a recent presentation in London, to discuss the game.

So why did you decide to return to a game that you've already re-released before?
Ninja Gaiden sold very well and many people played it, but still there are many more that have never played it. That's why I wanted to create this game for PS3. Especially in Japan, Xbox is not selling well, and there are many more big fans of PlayStation. So my strong wish is for those people to play *Ninja Gaiden*. That's the main motivation.

"Team Ninja's policy is to create games without languages – games that players can just play and have fun with – so that's the important thing for us to implement in Sigma"

Is there much temptation to add more than you should in releasing a new version of a game like *Ninja Gaiden*?
Yes, it's a general tendency – *Ninja Gaiden*'s game system has expanded more and more, and as a result it's become more complicated, so it's not easy for many players. Team Ninja's policy is to create games without languages – games that players can just play and have fun with – so that's the important thing for us to implement in *Sigma*, not simply add new features, which is very easy.

Team Ninja has a policy to make games specifically for certain platforms. Yet *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* is a port of an Xbox game – does this mean that titles now have to be multiplatform to achieve the reach you want for your games?
I'm a big fan of Xbox 360, but as you know it's not selling so well in Japan. As I said, I want more and more people to play *Ninja Gaiden*. But if you do that, I want to drive it to the highest quality on PS3. That's an important motivation I have for it. Also, Itagaki loves 360, but I love PS3, so I wanted to prove to him that we could make a product with the quality of *Ninja Gaiden* on PS3.

Do you think you've been successful?
Yes, I think so. I've tried to drive this more and more, and I have another idea for the platform. I don't want to betray PS3 fans in the future.

So what's in the future for *Ninja Gaiden*?
I don't know yet, but there are people who love the PS3, so naturally you can expect future games on PS3.





Hayashi (top right, at the London launch of *Sigma*) is a big fan of Sony's PlayStation 3, but the game's apparent re-use of Xbox assets, along with a dose of last-gen sparseness, point to this game being only a taste of what the developer can do with modern hardware. 'Project Impact', a game rumoured to be *Ninja Gaiden 2*, is said to be in development for Xbox 360

FRAG

Forget Red Bull: hardcore gamers now have another choice to fuel their late-night pwning sessions – the Headshot bar. Created by Uncommon Loot, an Indiana-based LAN gaming specialist, the reportedly tasty snack is distributed through gaming centres all over the US and apparently contains enough caffeine to give gamers 'an energy boost like never before'. Containing guarana, toffee and rice crisps, Headshot is the result of Uncommon Loot's **Brent David** observing customers at his gaming centre: "They always come up to the concessions bar and never really find what they want. They get something and then ten minutes later they are back looking for something else. So I saw a need."

www.uncommonloot.com





Jade's empire

With Assassin's Creed topping the list, Ubisoft's line-up of big-hitters shares an ambitious philosophy

Although the recent Ubidays conference did no more than tantalise us with a trailer for *Assassin's Creed*, deferring a hands-on demo of the medieval adventure game until July, all was not lost. We got the opportunity to talk with *Assassin's Creed* producer **Jade Raymond** (above) about the company's philosophy and the challenges of making such an intellectually ambitious title.

What were your considerations in talking about a firebrand subject like the Crusades?
We had to be extremely sensitive. We've heard the current political situation being compared to the Crusades – those parallels already exist. A lot of time was spent gathering information to make sure we really understood the history and could treat the subject with respect – so when we're deciding to give you something different from history we're conscious of that. The Assassins are a historical group of people, and, though not a lot is known about them, I'm sure they could be compared to things that would be controversial today. We wanted to reinvent them as modern thinkers who don't believe in war, who don't have any side.

They only assassinate people who are perpetuating conflict, making war itself their enemy. Given the parallels with today's crises, isn't that a political statement?
I guess it is. But at the same time it's definitely a fictional game, and meant to be entertaining. Obviously the team started out with the meaning and ideas, and for someone who's looking for more depth, there is a message. It's not a political message as such. Why does a good book have an impact on you? I think it's because it says something that makes you think a little bit differently. Why can't games do that too?

Both *Assassin's Creed* and *Haze* ask questions that are critical of war. Is there a shared thinking at Ubisoft encouraging these ideas?
I think we all feel that games have potential to be so much more, and we're leaning on these genres, these set-ups for action that we've always had. I also think that Ubisoft is anxious to see the game space evolve and start doing different things. There's definitely a general move to go beyond and think a bit more.

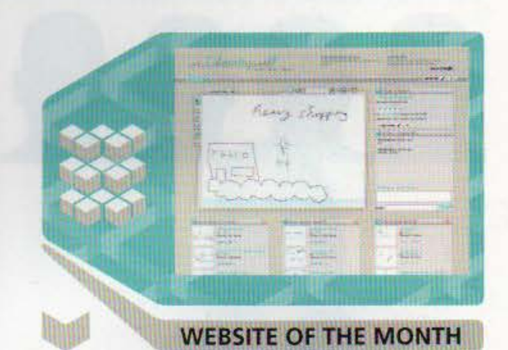
> **"I think that Ubisoft is anxious to see the game space evolve and start doing different things. There's definitely a general move to go beyond and think a bit more"**

Is there a crossover of other ideas, such as crowd gameplay, between the Ubisoft development teams?
It's interesting – the *Splinter Cell Conviction* team is in the same building as our team in Montreal, but we're working on completely different technology for *Assassin's Creed*. We built our own engine from scratch. We haven't really had that much interaction. I think on the surface you'll see similarities in the use of the crowd, but then we have 150 people onscreen at once in these huge cities, and *Conviction* has this emphasis on physics and using objects. The experience you're going to have will be very different. Maybe this isn't the best analogy, but there are arguments between Chinese people, Thai people and Italian people over who invented noodles – and it could just be that noodles are a good idea that lots of people had at the same time. So maybe crowd gameplay is like the noodles of the next generation. Who doesn't like noodles?





The protagonist, Altair, is a surprisingly liberal creation for an assassin; with a Christian mother and Muslim father, he kills those who cynically exploit the war for their own ends



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Armchair sadists will rejoice in Calamity Game, a new Flash physics toy that offers huge scope for creating intricate torture machines for its unfortunate ragdoll figure. Players build structures, tense springs and apply forces to any element using a simple interface that allows for all sorts of ingenious tricks, such as making water out of structural points and creation of carefully timed events. Its YouTube-style rating and commenting system shows the best creations, which you can build on as your own to quickly learn how it all works. As a beta, Calamity Game's physics are still a little scratchy, but it's tremendous fun.

Site:
Calamity Game
URL:
www.calamitygame.com

The Nottingham-based Monumental team has a background in MMO technology, which it is applying to football, rather than the other way around, which is the approach of its competitors



Playing as a single player rather than a team hive-mind means living the virtual life of an over-paid and under-educated footballer – and that leads to glamorous women (below)

A game of many halves

The future of football games may be a cross with the MMO. Like Cruyff said: coincidence is logical

Football games sell extremely well, even if they're not *FIFA* or *Pro Evolution Soccer*, and so it was almost inevitable that someone would have the idea of making the beautiful game an MMO. What is surprising is that it took so long before, like buses, two came along at once. *Football Superstars*, announced last month by Monumental Games, aims to offer a far more complete experience in a football world than its title implies, letting gamers live the life of a player, from jumpers in the park to capacity Premiership crowds. As well as kicking a ball, you'll live the social life, with all the accessories that come with it, from Ferraris to fedoras, and Monumental aims to create an online community that's as inclusive to football enthusiasts as gaming experts.

The game banks on the appeal of football being so wide that it can bear the weight of a universe, in the same way that the basic fantasy template can bear endless iterations. Massmarket appeal is the aim, thereby siphoning from a sport that's worth billions upon billions worldwide. But while the MMO genre may look like easy money in the wake of *World Of WarCraft*, a great number of development studios are waking up to the potential of online worlds and offline sports at the same time: indeed, it's difficult to see the announcement of *Football Superstars* so early in its dev cycle as anything but a direct response to April's announcement of *Football Manager Live*, an upcoming MMO based on Sports Interactive's hugely popular management series (see **E**176).

However, distinguishing *Football Superstars* within this market is a challenge that Monumental CEO **Rik Alexander** is not afraid to meet head on: "There are several major differences between this and the usual football videogame, and the key one is that you're your own person and dictate your own career: you're not just stepping into Beckham's shoes. You're actually living a life that's based around football, not just playing the game."

This game engine is, of course, where Football Superstars will succeed or fail regardless of any lifestyle accessories: if it doesn't play a good game of football, it won't find any fans

Football Superstars has a coherent concept but clearly there's still a long way to go: on our recent visit to Monumental's studio in Nottingham, very little could be seen, and almost no in-game content. The short demonstration that was given showed player movement with only a wholly right-footed dribbling animation around a small pitch, with the viewpoint reminiscent of *Actua Soccer*. Smoother animations will obviously come in time, but fundamentally the *Actua Soccer* viewpoint is a good choice, allowing full camera manipulation around a thirdperson view of the controlled player and a sizeable view of the playing field, which means you can follow the progress of the ball while moving around the pitch.

This game engine is, of course, where *Football Superstars* will succeed or fail regardless of any lifestyle accessories that can be accumulated: if it doesn't play a good game of football, it won't find any fans. This point has become even more important since EA's announcement of the 'Be a Pro' feature in upcoming *FIFAs*, which will eventually allow players to play online as members of a human team. The combination of the *FIFA* brand with the online infrastructure that's aiming for a virtual World Cup to be played alongside the real thing in 2010 will see many smaller brands fall by the wayside. Smaller projects such as *Football Superstars* can offer something different – primarily the chance to play as yourself rather than Ronaldinho – but the need to make this distinct from the wildly slick *FIFA* is now paramount.

One of the tricks in *Football Superstars*' locker could be aiming specifically for the PC football





The themed stadiums that are to be found in the *Superstars* world are products of the designers' imaginations, but given the look of the new Wembley might not be too far removed from the real world





HIGH SEAS GAMING

'Big game' specialist Area/Code is working on a DS version of its location-based pirate trading game, *Plundr*. Currently played via web browser, *Plundr* uses a wifi positioning system to locate players and 'islands' on a Google map of their local area. In much the same way as in *Elite*, players buy and sell produce or attack nearby ships to amass money and upgrade their ship, but to move from island to island they must move in physical space to where they want to go. Buccaneering by handheld rather than laptop certainly sounds convenient – a new life on the open streets beckons.

plundr.playareacode.com

market: the mouse is used to control the player's movement and actions, and whether your player chooses to shoot or pass will depend on the context-sensitive crosshair. If on top of a colleague's head, your player will lob the ball towards that position; if at their feet, it will be a ground pass. The success of the manoeuvre presumably depends on your avatar's level. Levelling within a sports title might make the MMO problem of experienced players beating up on others even more acute, but Alexander is keen to emphasise that "you're a good player from day one, and the game always comes down to skill rather than levels." Training your character will allow them to learn additional skills, but it would be a huge surprise if it didn't also increase stats such as pace and heading incrementally. Balancing the rewards for long-term players yet keeping the game accessible for first-timers will be a big challenge.

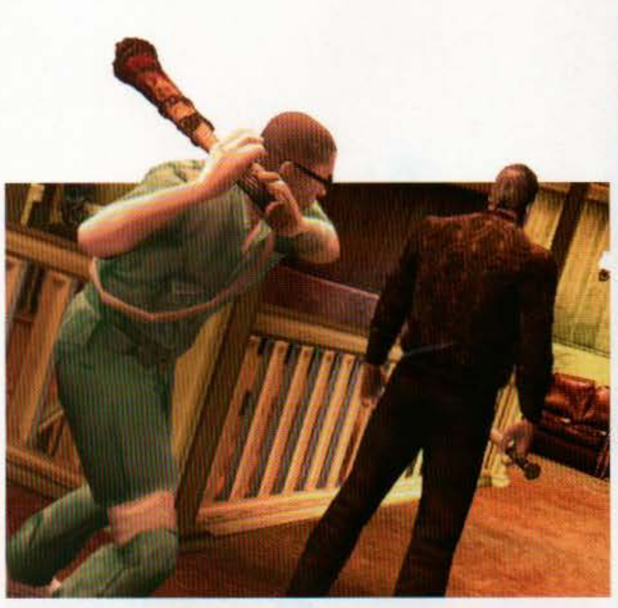
There's little detail currently available on *Football Superstars'* lifestyle sections, though the off-pitch activities of a pro footballer will come with all the mansions, flashy cars and dubious fashion decisions that involves. The need for a family-friendly rating will stop the inclusion of some of the less salubrious activities in which Premiership footballers allegedly indulge of a night-time, and the emphasis is more on lifestyle boutiques, flash cars and events at which to show off these status symbols.

A beta test is planned, and the full game is scheduled for release in spring 2008 on PC, though Monumental has confirmed that a version for home consoles is an eventual aim. It will come up against stiff competition, particularly as *Football Manager Live* is also scheduled for an early 2008 release. *Football Manager's* offline success has proved that the appeal of management can be as compulsive as that of playing the beautiful game, and while easy distinctions exist between each offering, potential fans are likely to plump for one rather than the other.

Though currently far from its overall goal, *FIFA's* Be a Pro mode will likely come to be the dominant player in the online single-footballer stakes, even if only in terms of installed base. *Football Superstars* is in many ways the more adventurous proposition, though, and its commitment to building activity around extra-curricular activities could make its emergence a fascinating one.



Monumental CEO Rik Alexander believes that the key to *Football Superstars'* appeal lies in its broad scope: "You're actually living a life that's based around football, not just playing the game"







The ESRB has given *Manhunt 2* an AO (Adults Only) rating in the US, meaning Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft will routinely refuse to license the game for their console hardware in the region. The Irish Film Censor's Office has also declined certification



SOFTWARE

Snuffed out

"Sustained and cumulative casual sadism" restricts game from legal sale in the UK

In the wake of the BBFC's refusal to issue a certificate to Rockstar's *Manhunt 2*, more details have emerged about just what led the board to take the almost unprecedented step.

Board director **David Cooke** said in a statement that the game contrasts from other videogames in its "unremitting bleakness and callousness of tone in an overall game context which constantly encourages visceral killing with exceptionally little alleviation or distancing."

Paul Jackson, director general of videogame trade body ELSPA, has spoken in support of the decision, claiming it proves that the ratings system is effective.

The BBFC's ruling was based on its finding that *Manhunt 2* offers little variety beyond killing. "We were looking at what the player was asked to do and what was on offer, and it's just an unrelenting series of killings," said BBFC spokesman **Sue Clark**. "Other games have more choice."

"Unremitting bleakness and callousness of tone in an overall game context which constantly encourages visceral killing with exceptionally little alleviation or distancing"

Manhunt 2's plot attempts to justify its gameplay: the player character has had experiments conducted on him in an attempt to create a perfect assassin, a man with a split personality that can be switched between without one being aware of the other. The early game sees him escaping from the asylum in which he's been incarcerated, pursued by more assassins sent by the people who experimented on him.

Later, he discovers his true nature, a revelation that prompts the final section, an internal struggle between his two states. Depending on how violent players were during the game they play as either the 'good' side or the psychotic version.



The BBFC denies that its decision has been affected by the controversies generated by previous Rockstar games, including the original *Manhunt*, which was rated 18, and *Canis Canem Edit*

It's possible to claim that the game gives some form of motive for the character's actions. After his first kill he vomits with shock, but the plot implies his increasing homicidal proficiency is a result of his psychotic side gaining power.

But the BBFC is more concerned about the moment-to-moment implications of the gameplay. "You have to be slightly careful about getting too philosophical about things," said Clark. "The plot isn't particularly strong in this game."

Manhunt 2 is the first game to be refused classification since *Carmageddon* in 1997, a decision that was overturned on appeal. At the time of going to press, Rockstar had yet to confirm whether or not it would appeal against the ruling, although it had stated that the game's distribution was 'temporarily suspended'.



DS Lite ramps up

Japanese shops finally have stock, but Nintendo's sales ambitions don't waver

New design options obviously give existing users reasons to buy more DS consoles. The 1-Seg TV tuner add-on, however, is likely to appeal just as much to those who aren't quite so committed

Nintendo's DS, which had previously been seen to sell out of Japanese stores within 20 minutes of being found in stock, is now frequently remaining on store shelves in the territory for entire days. Could it be that the stratospheric sales have propelled the handheld to market saturation? Perhaps not: at the time of writing, weekly figures have not confirmed a drop in sales, with the platform continuing to shift more than 100,000 units a week (a rate it has maintained since its release). In light of the sudden availability of stock, such stable sales numbers suggest that Nintendo has changed its production strategy to better serve the Japanese market.

Certainly, the company isn't resting on its laurels, showing concerted effort to keep sales buoyant. First, it is expanding the range of available DS colours, bringing in gloss silver and metallic pink, and introducing more special editions (such as the Pikachu edition and Square Enix's It's a Wonderful World edition). Second, and more importantly, Nintendo is continuing to explore new markets with its console: with its digital TV tuner, named 1-Seg, arriving later this year, the handheld should immediately see its appeal broadening further into the massmarket.

Interestingly, the hardware is also being repurposed as an educational device, and employed as a training tool for Japanese schools' English tests, while it has also seen use in certain primary schools, leading the Japanese press to speculate as to whether there may be a push to rebrand the console as some form of PDA.

Japan has 126 million citizens and somewhere between 30-40 million households. With 16 million units already sold, the DS still has room for expansion, although further broadening its reach obviously becomes more difficult for every week that passes in which these record numbers are sold. But we shouldn't forget that many Japanese DS users own more than one DS console, and will probably buy still more in the future.

Continue

E3
Get ready for some interesting surprises

Forza paint jobs
Hey, wait until we've finished this next one...

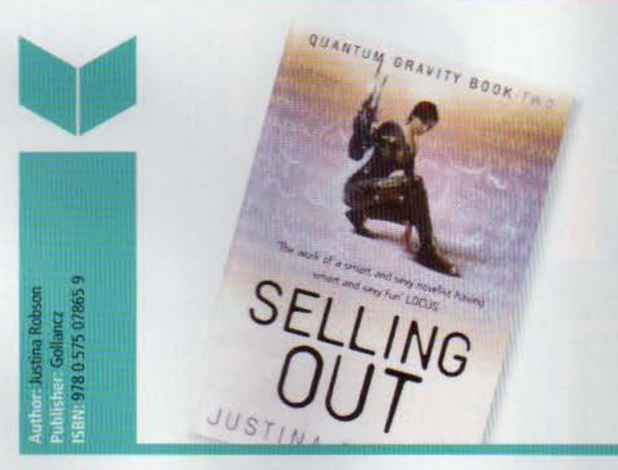
Leaderboards
Universal proof of just how good (bad) we are

Quit

Leaderboards
When saving the universe isn't enough

Forza paint jobs
How many more anime pin-ups can there be?

E3
Perversely, we'll miss a little of all that glitz

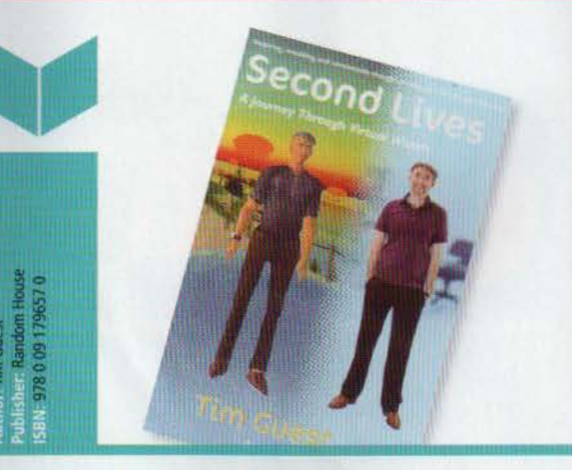


Author: Justina Robson
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 978 0 575 07865 9

SELLING OUT

The second book in Robson's human-demon-elf love triangle strains the limits of perception

As any painter, cook or chemist knows, the most likely result of mixing too many ingredients is a grey, mushy mess. When it comes to literature, the get-out clause is a strong underlying authorial voice: one which can blend together disparate characters, plot and emotion into a surprisingly coherent whole. Still, you have to wonder whether Justina Robson's been overly ambitious in her Quantum Gravity series, of which Selling Out is the second book. Not only are there multiple parallel universes of human, elf, demon and mysterious Others, but her lead character is a bionically combat-enhanced 20-something girl who's falling in love with an elf-demon rockstar, as well as having the soul of a dead elf hidden in her psyche and an annoying imp living on her shoulder. Welcome to the confused adolescence of Lila Black. Of course, tackling the second book in such a convoluted series isn't itself the easiest option – but the first, Keeping It Real, wasn't any less complex. This time, however, Lila's been sent by her bosses to Demonia to check up on her boyfriend's origins, wherein she kills a stupid, rich-kid demon, gets into a deathwish dance with a necromancer and, after jousting with its doorwoman, is sent to Hell. Said boyfriend, on the other hand, decides to hang out in some sort of dimensionless research facility in search of ghosts. Oh, please do keep up; because if you can't, or don't find Robson's sassy style to your liking, this really does turn into a thousand shades of grey.



Author: Tim Guest
Publisher: Random House
ISBN: 978 0 09 179657 0

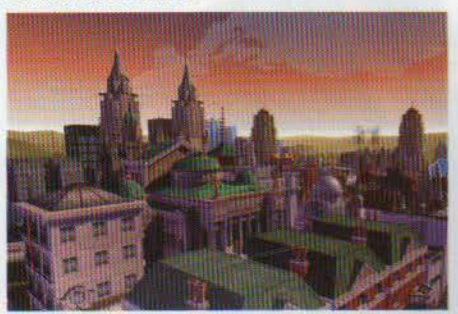
SECOND LIVES

Edge columnist Tim Guest makes the personal case for the attractions and dangers of online existence

Writing books about gaming is difficult. Authors have to choose between the dull processes behind the scenes, or try to inculcate themselves into the cultures created by their users. Writing about online games makes everything much easier. It's simple to jump overboard and stay up late and embed yourself in the whole overwhelming experience. Perhaps it's little wonder that so few books get beyond the classic internet cliché that, on the web, nobody knows you're a dog. A childhood spent in the communal embrace of the orange-clad followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh means Tim Guest is somewhat more sceptical about the personal impact of trying to live the slippery utopia dream, however. And it's in his chaotic travels in the real and virtual worlds that such points are highlighted. During his writing he starts smoking, is burgled, breaks up with his girlfriend, and worries about his career. It's clear why buying an online beachside property and staring out of the window at the beautiful sunset becomes so seductive. So even as he points out the palpable benefits for people such as the group with developmental disabilities who co-operatively run an online character, he's never totally convinced by the more spectacular claims made by proponents. 'All cults think they're the good ones', he half-jokes. Online gaming may be a more intense period of existence, but for most it's generally just a phase, not a life replacement. Guest succeeds in setting it into some perspective.

SimCity Societies

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** EA



Caesar IV developer Tilted Mill brings about some socio-political upheaval, proudly challenging you to build anything from a bohemian 'utopia' to a brutal police state. And, of course, roads

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga

FORMAT: 360, DS, PS3, Wii **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS



With the Wars over (on the big screen, at least), it's time for the clean-up operation. Together with drop-in/drop-out Live co-op, all six movies come together in this buffed and bolstered anthology

Dark Sector

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** D3PUBLISHER



Another future shock for Digital Extremes' troubled project, this time delaying its release until 2008 to avoid an impending action game melee. (Won't there be another wave next year, though?)

Soul Calibur IV

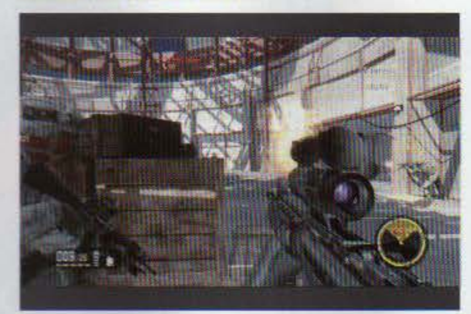
FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



How brightly will the soul burn on cutting-edge hardware? No word yet on supported resolutions and just an ambiguous teaser trailer to look at, but interactive environments are confirmed

America's Army: True Soldiers

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Ignoring for a moment the unusual title, the coupling of the Warfighter 2 engine and developer Red Storm should win some recruits from the Live community. Troops ship out in September

Need For Speed ProStreet

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** 360, PS3, TBC



Feeling the need for a much better name, Black Box's latest steps up the AI and performance customisation to provide streamlined duelling. Given EA's ruthless yearly schedule, it does look pretty

Time Crisis 4

FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



With Guncon 3 comes a home conversion with shots as sharp as its looks. A pair of TV-mounted sensors heal the long-standing rift between lightguns and modern sets, or at least that's the target

Speedball II XBLA

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** EMPIRE INTERACTIVE



That's more like it. Frogster's dubious PC version, with its skewed perspective and empty arena, goes head to head with the real Brutal Deluxe. Best of all: no visual scaling to ruin the artwork

Shadowgrounds Survivor

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** MERIDIAN4



Frozenbyte's neat little top-down shooter gets a sequel, this time with an 'RPG upgrade' system for its weapons and an extra life for its solo mode, courtesy of the eponymous survival mode

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Chalk

www.konjak.org/chalk.htm

To some people, there are few sensations more unpleasant than the bringing together of a piece of chalk and a chalkboard. Yet animator and game-maker Joakim Sandberg manages to use precisely this combination to come up with one of the most innovative indie games in recent times.

Through a selection of horizontally and vertically scrolling levels with beautifully kitsch hand-drawn backgrounds, you guide your character using the right mouse button while drawing chalk lines with the left.

An assortment of foes fly at you from all sides of the screen, and your chalking can be used in a variety of ways – as a shield, as a herder, as a slingshot, and as a weapon in its own right.

The game all too quickly becomes a test of nerve as the enemies emerge in different forms and patterns, and your mouse has to pull a double shift as both offence and defence – but the reward for the stressed twitch-gaming is a good old fashioned arcadey glow. Very slick.



With its distinctive presentational style and smattering of unique gameplay touches, *Ragnarok Online* has romanced some Japanese MMO fans, but it remains a niche title

Japan's online champion?

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa boggles at the potential of Monster Hunter Frontier Online

A series mainly focused on the Japanese and Asian market, *Monster Hunter* has sold more than 3.7 million copies of its PS2 and PSP versions. The title for the latter console, *Monster Hunter Portable 2*, shifted a million copies by itself and is widely considered the saviour of the PSP in Japan. Naturally, as a franchise of such incredible popularity, its recently announced move to the PC with *Monster Hunter Frontier Online* is the cause of much excitement.

To understand why the title is causing such a stir, you have to look at the size of the PC gaming market in Japan. Compared to that for console gaming, PC gaming is very much a niche market; over here, selling just 10,000 copies constitutes a hit on the PC. To put that in perspective, every year there are a fair number of console titles that sell millions upon millions of copies. Even in the field of online gaming, currently mostly a PC pursuit, there are a small number of casual gaming sites that can count more than a million subscribers, but few of them are actually profitable, having failed to turn those customers into a solid business model.

In terms of MMOs, the Japanese market is more fragmented than the west, but, as such, offers more diversity. Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XI* still maintains a great deal of popularity, with an active userbase in the hundreds of thousands. Then there's Gun-Ho's *Ragnorak Online* and EA's *Ultima Online*, but nothing is able to claim an equivalent degree of success as *World Of WarCraft* has in the western market – Japanese PC gaming just isn't able to furnish games with that many users.

So, knowing all this, it really is quite a surprise to see that *Monster Hunter Frontier Online* already has 80,000 copies on preorder. Though the packaged version here comes with special items and bonuses, this can't really account for the unprecedented scale of its anticipation; such items will become downloadable for free when the service officially goes live.

No doubt much of this is due to the huge marketing machine that has been deployed to publicise the game – but this in itself is something of a phenomenon; it is very rare to see such a massive effort being made in the promotion of a PC game. Numerous collaborations have been announced with companies to raise the mainstream profile of the title, creating branding alliances with Intel and other hardware manufacturers, big-name food companies and even credit cards. The announcement saw celebrities take to the stage. It's all very unusual.

Compared to console gaming, PC gaming is very much a niche market. Selling just 10,000 copies constitutes a hit on the PC. To put that in perspective, every year there are a fair number of console titles that sell millions of copies

Sales of the first two games in Capcom's *Monster Hunter* series are on their way to 4m units. The PSP game (below) has driven hardware sales



Is *Monster Hunter Frontier Online* really the game that will see adoption of PCs as game devices to compete with consoles in Japan?

Naturally, the Japanese PC gaming industry is hugely excited by the prospect of so many new gamers flooding into their market from the world of consoles, thanks to the power of the *Monster Hunter* brand. But some are more sceptical as to the success of this manoeuvre. The main reason for this is that *Monster Hunter Frontier* is going to be a significantly different game from its predecessors. There is no solo mode to it, and being a wholly online game it necessarily stands apart from the gameplay to which fans of the series will be accustomed. Whether the legions of fans will follow the franchise loyally into this new area, or come in their droves only to be ultimately disappointed by the change in direction, remains to be seen. *Monster Hunter Frontier* certainly has the branding to bring in a new era of PC gaming if everything goes to plan – having resuscitated one console, the PSP, already. With just a single game having so much sway over the fortunes of an entire industry, the next year looks to be a very important one for Japanese PC gaming.

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Fallout 3



With Bethesda's lengthy period of secrecy approaching its end, anticipation for the blackly humorous and super-violent sequel is building to fever pitch
360, PC, PS3, BETHESDA SOFTWORKS

Mass Effect



The delay to BioWare's sci-fi epic is agonising, but hopefully the extra development time will do justice to the scale of its promised series of profound dilemmas
360, MICROSOFT

Sega Rally



Forget gritty realism. We want to send the mud flying in long drifts through lush tropical forests under Sega-blue skies, a TV helicopter urging us ever onwards
360, PC, PS3, PSP, SEGA

A firstperson philosophy

The mainstream shooters with allegorical messages



BioShock is full of environmental details that are just as easy to walk straight past as they are to thoughtfully savour. It's a great strength of games that they can allow their players such choices, allowing them to tell deeper stories that don't necessarily get in the way of a shootout

They might not wear their politics lightly, but the films in George A Romero's Dead series are still potent indictments of inequality, ignorance, greed and amorality. But though the zombies might symbolise disenfranchised masses, left to face brutality at the hands of survivors representing a cruel social and political elite, Romero's films still revel in the fact that they're genre horror. They delight in showing zombies tearing characters' guts out and ramping up tension to set jump-shock traps like any other splatter films.

This month, we look at two games that work in very similar ways. *BioShock* and *BlackSite* both have strong allegorical threads running through them, grand stories about the follies of fixed ideology, modern geopolitics and cultures of fear. Yet both are also unashamed, balls-to-the-wall firstperson shooters. Just as you can enjoy Dawn Of The Dead without thinking once about the emptiness of consumerist society, you'll be able to blast your way through *BioShock* and *BlackSite* without troubling their deeper meanings.

That's because, though these games' messages aren't subtle in themselves, they're subtly woven into their fabric. Atlas, for instance, a character who provides early support to the player character in *BioShock*, is modelled on Ayn Rand's ideas about objectivism and named after her book, Atlas Shrugged, the plot of which mirrors the story behind Rapture itself. A thousand little details – a poster here, a splicer's behaviour there – flesh out the allegory to form a complete world without impinging on the running and gunning.

It's easy to assume that because these games don't allow their politics to take centre stage they'll be watered down, demoted to provide an easier sell and mass commercial appeal. Certainly, before anything else, *BioShock* is being presented as a shooter, and Rapture's dripping atmosphere is just as ripe with frights and lashings of thrilling gore as it is metaphor and symbolism.

But such fears crumble in the face of games unafraid to present sophisticated (by mainstream standards) messages to their players. As the Dead series demonstrates, popularity doesn't necessarily mean skimping on communicating wider themes, and it seems that videogames are learning this lesson, too.



FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **IRRATIONAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUGUST**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**

BioShock

Big Daddies and Little Sisters, genetic modification and old fashioned revolvers: Irrational gives horror new depth

A large-eyed little girl cowers on the ground. She's whimpering as you stand over her, deciding whether to rescue her, or to harvest the precious genetic material she possesses for your own ends.

You have the words of two people ringing in your ears. Atlas, the pragmatic Irishman who has been giving you advice by radio since you entered the undersea hell of Rapture, says she is no longer a human and therefore no longer deserving of pity: what she has will save you. Dr Tanenbaum, apparently the creator of this strange little girl, and others like her, says the opposite, and that if you save her you'll be rewarded in time. Trouble is, you have no idea what motivates either of them and therefore who to believe.

Moral decisions aren't new to games, but you won't have experienced a choice as graphic and difficult to resolve as this one. Videogame logic will tell you that the pros and cons of either will probably balance out, but without the likes of *KOTOR*'s sliding scale of evil and its binary choices, *BioShock* takes a much more profound step into questions of morality. "It's about humanity, and the loss of humanity," says senior designer **Joe McDonagh**. "It's about what you're prepared to do to survive."

> Character oozes out of every corner of the environments, allowing them to steadily detail what life was like in Rapture before its fall as you move through them

With such moral positioning and its intriguingly novel setting, a 1940s utopian society that has fallen prey to greed and vice, *BioShock* has great power to say something about science's relationship with idealism and unchecked human nature, but from this look at its first level, the emphasis is on revelling in scene-setting.

The action opens with the player character's plane crashing into the sea, and a desperate swim through a fuel-fed inferno towards a nearby rock, which turns out to be the entrance to the city. So starts a remarkable sequence that introduces Rapture, with a journey in a bathysphere down through the fathoms, passing whales cruising through its vertiginous, neon-adorned streets and accompanied by a scratchy cine-reel movie of its creator, Andrew Ryan.





Plasmids run the usual selection of elemental types: fire, electricity and ice. Videos of the later game reveal more imaginative ones, including the ability to release flies from under the player's skin that will attack foes







Splicers in the first section wear masquerade ball masks for added creepy effect. In general, the splicers seem territorial, sporting rotting clothes and uniforms to matc[h] the areas they inhabit. They carry a variety of weapons but, at least in the first area, don't use any plasmids

To say the game is atmospheric understates the superbly detailed and evocative art direction. Character oozes out of every corner of the environments, allowing them to steadily detail what life wa[s] like in Rapture before its fall as you move through them. Its once-opulent Art Deco decor – reds, golds and greens, filigreed metalwork, illustrated posters – is now rotting and destroyed. Even the first hour of play, which spans entrance halls, medical an[d] dental facilities and a tennis practice area, displays a wide variety of styles.

Early exploration is punctuated by frequent, fast-paced battles with splicers – the mutated and insane remnants of its human population. Though fast and aggressive enough to easily cause panic, splicers are also given the trappings of interior life, pitiably muttering and groaning to themselves – one early encounter feature[s] a female splicer weeping over a pram.

Early on, too, *BioShock* introduces you to its two main stars, the Big Daddies and Little Sisters (see 'Come to Papa'), in a scen[e] showing a Big Daddy catching a splicer slyly attempting to harvest its Little Sister and brutally dispatching him. Boldly, it's also comfortable with showing the fallibility of these hulking beasts just a few minutes late[r]





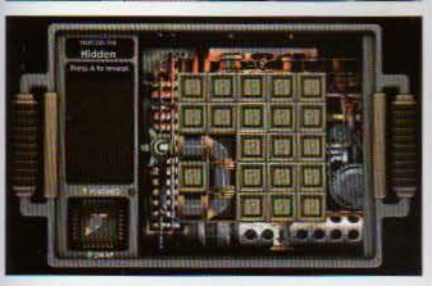


Much as they seem impregnable, Big Daddies can be brought down with a lot of ammo. Luckily, the early section puts you in close proximity to a live one. With Eve (the energy needed for using Plasmids) and ammo resources so scarce, use of the environment will be fundamentally important to defeating them





The first area awards players with three conventional weapons – a heavy wrench, a revolver and a machine gun (above). Each is a little awkward to use, and ammunition is scarce. Different ammo types include bullets with electrical or armour-piercing properties



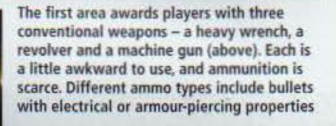
This minigame is initiated every time you hack into an auto-turret or hovering sentry to make them attack your enemies. It requires you to create a channel for blue fluid to flow to an exit point by switching panels containing differently shaped pipes. Though reasonably entertaining in itself, the contrast between minigame and the main game can feel jarring

when you witness one blown through a door by an explosion to land in front of you, dead.

You're soon given access to plasmids, genetic upgrades that are the game's equivalent of magic skills. The first is the Electrobolt, the ability to shoot electrical bolts out of your hand. Another two soon follow; the acquisition at this point feels like collecting a bunch of keys: Electrobolt opens an electric lock, Incinerate opens up an iced-up corridor, Telekinesis (very similar to *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun) allows you to propel an explosive barrel into debris to clear it.

But it's obvious that each ability has much more potential. The Electrobolt will stun enemies (particularly useful against turrets and security bots, before nipping in to hack them so they target your foes instead of you), and can take several out at once if they're standing in water. Incinerate will start fires that will spread over flammable materials, and there's always plenty of debris for Telekinesis to propel across a room. Sure, none of these early-game plasmids are particularly original, but each is tightly woven into the game mechanic and is inherently explicable.

Along with the availability of a range of ammo types, which pep up its pleasingly cumbersome, '40s-style conventional arsenal, this play of *BioShock* reveals it to be an intricate system of destructive and tactical toys that have a close, almost symbiotic relationship with Rapture's environments. *BioShock*'s success will lie in how it manages to sustain and support the dizzying range of strategies it affords its players, but so far it looks supremely confident.





Come to Papa

The Big Daddies and Little Sisters are integral to *BioShock* – a little way in, players are given a sub-quest to either rescue or harvest three Little Sisters in each area. Naturally, this means taking out the Big Daddies that protect them. "They are the focus of the game, and they get harder and harder until at the end the levels are like battle maps," says McDonagh. "You start to look at the world very differently – you see a camera up there, a turret, some water, a teddy bear you can set on fire. You start to make some very elaborate plans because you have to."



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **MIDWAY AUSTIN**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**



BlackSite

Midway Austin's FPS walks a tightrope between convention and invention

"What can you do with a shooter?" As lead designer of *Deus Ex*, **Harvey Smith** is in a pretty good position to pose questions like this. And, as creative director of Midway Austin, it's the starting point for planning *BlackSite*, the follow-up to 2005's alien-bashing FPS, *Area 51*.

His answer isn't quite the revolution that *Deus Ex* was. Instead, *BlackSite* looks to be another thoroughly competent story-driven tactical shooter that follows the story of a special-ops soldier. It's a pragmatic solution to making a new game in an entrenched genre. "Shooters are going to change incrementally over time," he says, explaining that *BlackSite*'s feature list contains little that many other games aren't doing already. "We've got vehicles, we've got co-op, we've got breakables from *Stranglehold* technology, but a lot of games have that, right? We've got two on-rails shooting sections – one in a Humvee and one in a helicopter, and other people are doing that too."

BlackSite's incremental development is instead based on several interesting and smaller, though hardly radical, ideas that, like the rest of the game, seem solidly implemented. The first is a squad morale system that influences how the player's AI team reacts in battle. If you can manage the squad efficiently, giving it lots of orders that lead to successful enemy encounters, the squad will gain morale and become better in combat – more aggressive and more accurate. If you do badly, failing to give good orders, morale drops and the squad becomes defensive, hunkering down behind cover and blind-firing. The result is a system that encourages and rewards careful and strategi[c] play. It's also a complex one: Smith admits balancing the sudden increases in difficulty when morale drops is one of the big challenges for his team in their last three months of development.

The squad AI is capable in itself, bringing enemies down and using environmental cover with autonomous ease, and the contextual point-and-click system for directing it is intelligent. Squad members wil[l] move to relevant positions near to where they're ordered. Opening doors is a simple matter of pointing and the AI will do the rest, exhibiting a sophisticated range of animations that go beyond the usual brusqu[e] kick, such as carefully breaking an adjacent window to unlock it.

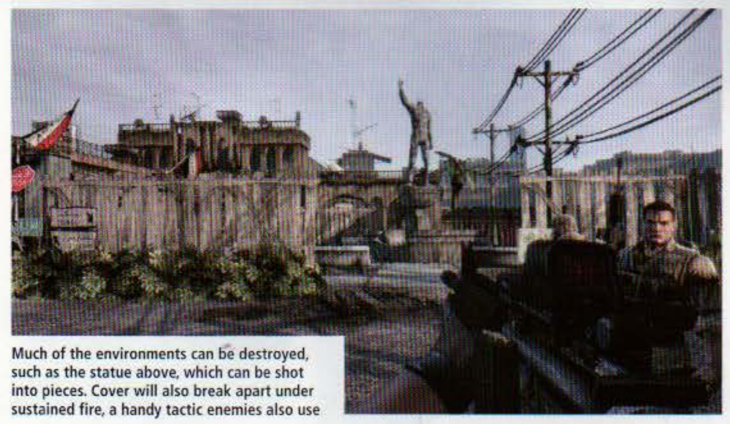
Another idea is *BlackSite*'s narrative theme, which neatly subverts the usual militaristic jingoism that modern shooters usually exhibit. The game opens with a level set in Iraq that follows a hunt for weapons o[f] mass destruction. So far, so generic. But when the action moves on to American soil, specifically a dustbowl Nevadan town called Rachel, the focus changes completely. It turns out that the alien scourge has actually been created by the US government. "The enemy you're mostly fighting is an insurgency on American soil, but we created the enemy that we're now sending our troops to fight, and somebody is profiting from that," says Smith.

Huge tentacles erupt from the road, aliens driving jeeps attack, and the epic boss fight is against an enormous tentacled beast clinging to a precipitous bridge









Much of the environments can be destroyed, such as the statue above, which can be shot into pieces. Cover will also break apart under sustained fire, a handy tactic enemies also use









This scene is part of an on-rails helicopter section. The beast is fairly standard boss fare to kill: it fires balls of toxic gloop that must be shot at before they reach your chopper, and flails madly with its tentacles

These alien beasts, found in the town of Rachel, are agile and take a fair amount of fire before they go down. Their Starship Troopers-meets-Alien look is obscured by the way they move

The allegory is obvious and unambiguous. But, as **Ken Levine** recently said of *BioShock*: "We have these philosophical notions, but you've got to deliver. You gotta bring home the monsters." *BlackSite* is also careful to avoid its politics getting in the way of the game being a rollicking thrill ride. "The tone is from the left, but we didn't want to beat you over the head with it," says Smith. "We wanted to organically weave it through the whole thing, so there are allusions to Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, to the Walter Reed [Army Medical Center] scandal."

Correspondingly, the three levels that were shown at a recent presentation are glossy and fast-paced, with all the gung-ho shouting from squad members that a shooter could need. Whoops of congratulation accompany a takedown of an errant Iraqi during the first level, a walk through a town. The environments are fairly open and offer a range of tactics, from hanging back and sniping while sending the squad forward to flanking manoeuvres. Enemies use cover, which is mostly destructible, until forced out into the open when enough has been blown away to make it useless.

The second level is set around a shop in Rachel with a fibreglass flying saucer and alien on its roof, and a trailer park behind it. The squad is harried by a tightly scripted series of alien attacks, though there's a fair amount of opportunity to explore off the main path. The section ends with a meeting with a townsman who talks about how the attackers that have killed his family have "crossed the border".

The third is a highly dramatic on-rails shooting sequence from the vantage point of a helicopter. It opens with supporting a convoy along a road at the bottom of a deep gorge. Various spectacular events occur – huge tentacles erupt from the road, aliens driving jeeps attack, and the pièce de résistance is an epic boss fight against an enormous tentacled beast clinging to a precipitous bridge.



BlackSite demonstrates a wide range of environments and conditions, from a small US town on a stormy night to a sweltering day in rocky canyons to war-torn Iraq

BlackSite already looks like a polished, thoughtfully designed product. But a product is all *BlackSite* is – it offers little to get excited about. Indeed, even Smith appears to already be focused on its sequel – he's enthusiastic about making its environments freer. So, back to the question, 'What can you do with a shooter?' According to *BlackSite*, not much in a mechanical sense at least. But as a high-quality, popularist game that isn't afraid to show a little political underbelly, it can't be faulted. That it will be released at the same time as *Halo 3* is another matter.



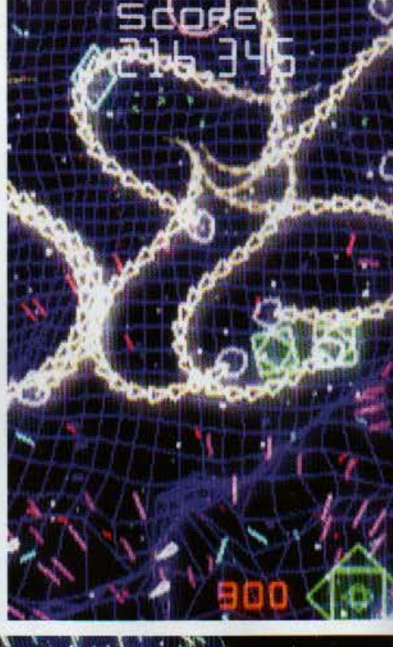
Where's Player Two?

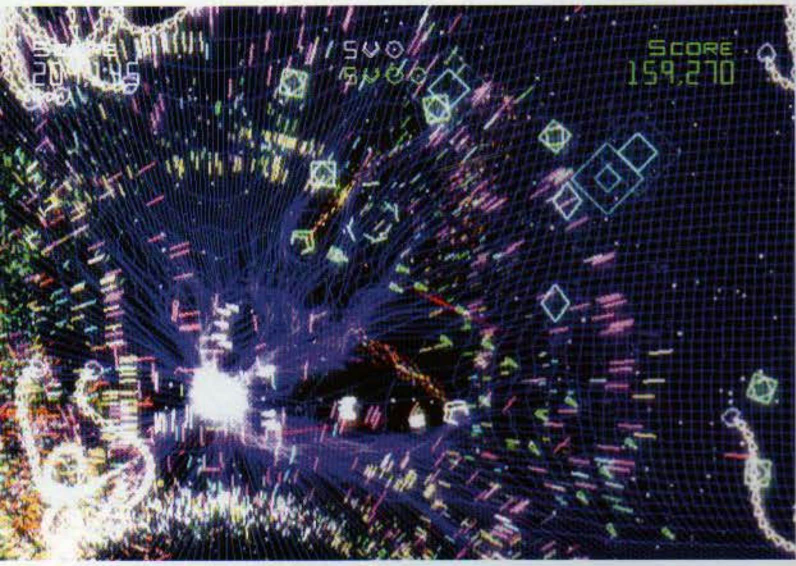
"We're so arrogant. We said, 'Co-op? That'll be no problem'. And then at every turn it has fucked us." Smith and his team have given *BlackSite* a *Gears Of War*-style drop-in-drop-out co-op mode that covers the full campaign. "It's amazing how you can be in a room of game development veterans and realise your helicopter only has one turret. It's simple stuff like that, but it's also about tuning: how hard is it? Who controls the squad? It's a hundred things in every location. It affects how many enemies you have on-screen. It affects the fiction. We're trying to do it the right way – not every single thing you can do with co-op, but we're going to try to make it maximally fun."

FORMAT: **DS, Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

Geometry Wars: Galaxies

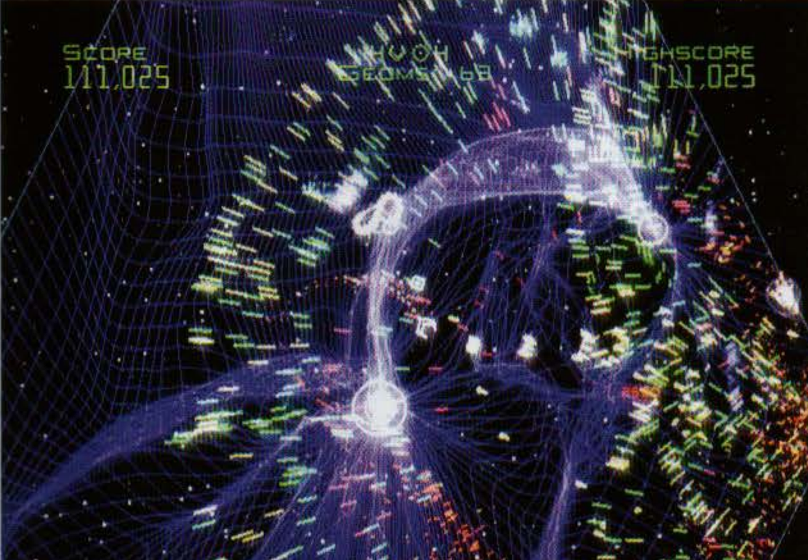
Bizarre sees its Live Arcade star blown up to cosmic proportions





The Wii shows itself proficient at throwing around similar amounts of particles to those found in *Retro Evolved*, even in *Galaxies'* unfinished state. The lower resolution has no effect on the intensity of action





Bizarre approached Sierra with a proposal to extend *Geometry Wars* to new platforms as recently as the end of last year. That *Galaxies'* fresh ideas and Wii and DS controls are already firmly implemented is quite remarkable

New control schemes, a mission-based play structure and a raft of new play options. The very idea sounds like a violation of *Geometry Wars'* stark, focused simplicity. And get this: one of the most wilfully abstract games in existence now has a rudimentary story. Apparently, the galaxy needs ridding of the little angular nasties we've grown to love. But here's the kicker: *Geometry Wars: Galaxies* actually looks rather good.

Developed by Kuju, this further evolution of *Geometry Wars* for the Wii and DS is based on a control system that was prototyped at its originator, Bizarre Creations, and, according to project producer **Roger Carpenter**, based on ideas that original designer Stephen Cakebread couldn't squeeze into *Retro Evolved*. The result is a leap from the purity of the original games, yet it generally feels as if their core ideals – score, tight enemy behaviour design, control – have been retained.

First, the structure. Instead of its predecessors' single level, *Galaxies* will have many, each selected from a map of the galaxy that smoothly zooms into individual solar systems. The levels are less stages than scenarios; environments with specific rulesets that play on and on, just as the originals did, until all lives are finally extinguished and a high score generated. The stages revealed so far are Alien Storm, which has a small, claustrophobic square playfield, Neo Classical, which is much the same as *Retro Evolved* but with *Galaxies'* new enemies, and the tricksier Orbiter, a hexagonal playfield that features at its centre a large gravity well, around which the player ship and all enemies must orbit. But not, it should be noted, bullets. "We tried it, but it worked a little strangely," says Carpenter.

Within these arenas, *Galaxies* introduces two big new additions. The first is the geome, an in-game currency that's released by destroyed enemies. The second is a drone helper, a little autonomous ship that comes with a series of player-selected behaviours – including defending, which makes it fire in directions that you are not – and also collects geomes for you. The choice adds a little strategy to each level – some will be more survivable with the right kind of drone. It also levels up, and can be upgraded using geomes. The idea is that, just as a *Geometry Wars* level is theoretically infinitely long, the drone can infinitely level up, too.

Galaxies will also feature various new weapons (currently being kept under wraps) and enemies. Seen during our playtest were the mutator, a mass of angry lines that runs away from you and mutates enemies into biohazard symbols that move fast towards your ship; the generator, a swirl that's immune to your shots while coloured red and

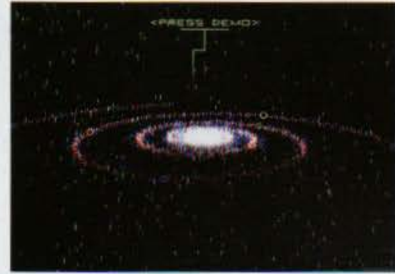
Multiplayer play flows smoothly from players competing for kills to gain higher scores to the need to work together to survive. Pooling bombs and score subtly modifies the dynamic

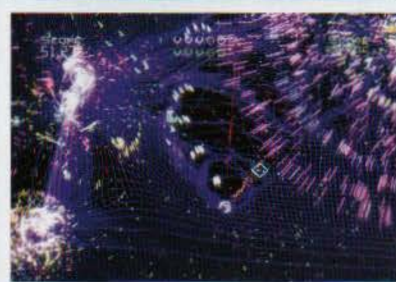






The level select screens smoothly zoom from galaxy to solar system to the play grid itself as you proceed through them. Every effort has been made to preserve the simple graphic design of the originals, even if the game's structure has been massively extended





Geometry Wars' original designer, Stephen Cakebread, has been involved with *Galaxies* at an executive level, but the concept and initial development was carried out by Bizarre Creations design manager Craig Howard. Kuju was chosen to complete the project because of its experience working with Nintendo as a firstparty developer on the likes of the GC's *Battalion Wars*

spews out enemies; and the UFO, a fleeting opportunity to score big points that rather resembles those found in *Asteroids*. Another parallel with that classic is in large versions of the standard enemies that break up into smaller ones when shot at.

'Winning' the game is down to achieving ranks on each level, awarded for a combination of time, score and geome collection. But to preserve the long-term appeal of *Retro Evolved*, each level will also have its own online leaderboard. "We're pushing leaderboards more than Nintendo has ever seen," says Carpenter, explaining that his team intends for *Galaxies* to also include other high score tables. He admits that the final result will be defined less by their ambitions than the limits of Nintendo's network infrastructure. A natural concern, however, is that the drone upgrade and levelling system might skew the high score table into reflecting how much time players have spent developing them rather than actual skill.

Remarkably, the DS and Wii versions will contain exactly the same content. It's a little strange seeing on a tiny DS screen what you're used to experiencing in widescreen high-definition, but it works, even if it probably won't run quite as smoothly as its considerably bigger brothers. Both versions will have their own online leaderboards, accessed through their wifi, but owners of both will have the chance to place their combined DS/Wii scores on an 'Elite' leaderboard. Such owners will also be rewarded with other, undisclosed bonuses.

The big difference between the two versions is control. Kuju's intended primary scheme for the Wii is ship movement through the Nunchuck and fire direction through pointing with the Remote. It works well, though takes some getting used to – it's easy to get flustered when the action gets chaotic. Other schemes will also be available, possibly including the use of the Classic Controller's twin-sticks. "It's on our wish list, and we have been given permission from Nintendo. We'll investigate any control method, as long as it doesn't hinder the gameplay," says Carpenter. The DS version, meanwhile, will allow a choice of playing on the top or bottom screens, moving with the D-pad and aiming with the touchscreen or face buttons.

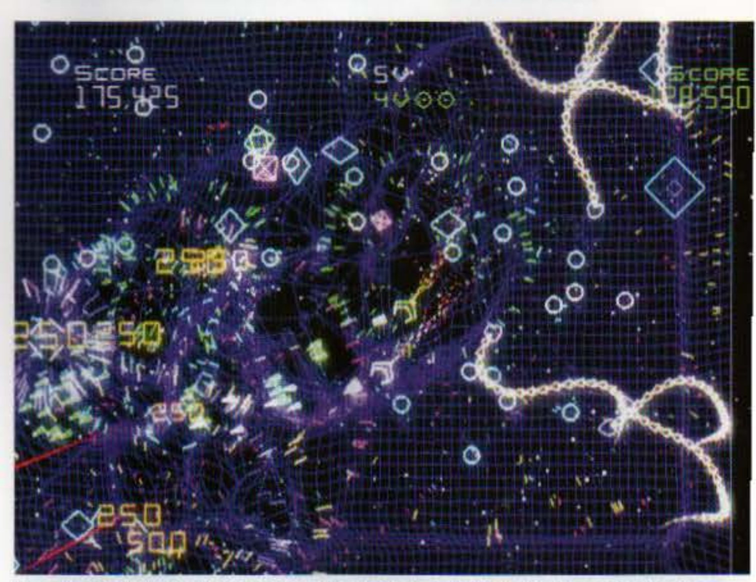
Kuju is clearly investing a lot in exploring control setups as deeply as possible, but ultimately it's likely that a single scheme will turn out to be markedly better than any other. Whether the Wii Remote and DS touchscreen can provide better control than the original's twin-sticks remains to be seen, as does whether each of *Galaxies'* many levels could possibly retain the tight balance of the original's singles. So far, though, Kuju's near-exponential building on *Geometry Wars'* minimalist charms appears expansive yet sensitive enough that a good part of it will prove thoroughly satisfying.

The DS and Wii versions will contain exactly the same content. It's strange seeing on a tiny DS screen what you're used to experiencing in widescreen, but it works



Multi-play

Galaxies will also feature a generous array of twoplayer multiplayer modes. We played a co-op game that gave separate scores and bomb counts for each player, delivering a good tension between working together and vying for points. Kuju is planning to offer four variants of mode to encourage different levels of competition and teamwork. The DS version will game-share the full multiplayer mode, though neither the DS nor Wii version will include online play – lag would be disastrous in a game so intricately busy.



The red lines in the bottom left corner show your aim. The aim is relative to the ship position onscreen, which stays permanently central in oneplayer mode but, obviously, shifts around during multiplayer

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **BIG BIG STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice

High-octane Hollywood thrills return to the small screen



Boss vehicle sections are usually a scripted path of destruction, the player character mounting and then making his way across them, taking out turrets and personnel with a mixture of QTEs and duck-and-cover shooting



It's perhaps appropriate that the PSP title that has pushed the handheld the most to provide an experience close to that found on 'proper' consoles has returned with a sequel that will also be released on PS2. *Extreme Justice* promises to add to the original's bombastic reading of Hollywood blockbuster narratives with even more over-the-top scenarios.

Each stage is made up of a series of levels – from driving to shooting to on-foot sections – that culminate in a huge set-piece taken straight from the likes of Mission: Impossible. The first stage is a race through city streets to catch up with a psycho-commandeered fire truck; others feature a turret-encrusted mega-tank, a huge bomber plane, hovercraft – you get the picture.

Big Big promises that *Extreme Justice*'s stages will feature greater variety than the first game – they're certainly fast-paced, quickly moving between different types of action. Handling has also been tightened up, and roads are wider to prevent some of the awkward corners and busy traffic tangles that marred the first game. This iteration will also include AI teammates, who will help out according to their skills, such as melee fighting and driving. In a stage we've seen, the player's role was to manoeuvre their car up to a tank and allow a teammate to jump back and forth to load it with bombs.

Ultimately, *Extreme Justice* is much more of the same. But, with the original looking as if it had aspirations above its station, it's to the sequel's credit that it has stayed true to its likeably overblown roots.







Extreme Justice will feature a new fourplayer ad-hoc multiplayer mode on the PSP (but with only two players on the PS2) and will support downloadable content

The Bourne Conspiracy

You are the perfect weapon, and you've got a headache

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **HIGH MOON**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **TBC 2008**



When Bourne fires the view moves to a *RE4* perspective – but is he an MP5 man, or has he become videogame typecast?

Amnesia can be a bit of a problem when you're a former assassin being hunted by your former employers. Where do you go? Who do you know? Where does it all end? For fans of the Bourne films the end is in sight – in gaming, the Bourne series begins and ends this year. Concentrating on the original novels, Robert Ludlum's The Bourne Conspiracy certainly has enough material to deliver a great experience – whether it will is another matter.

Screenshots released thus far are uninspiring, showing a graphically unexceptional thirdperson adventure. But to be fair, the emphasis within the Bourne series has always been on Jason Bourne's combat abilities within average situations, using his enemies and environment to his advantage. High Moon promises the ability to 'weaponise' everyday items, as well as using your surroundings for 'devastating takedowns' and the inevitable stealth sections. Unfortunately, this is exactly what *Splinter Cell: Conviction* promises, and with more to show for itself at this stage (see **E**176). However, a completely context-sensitive environment for thirdperson combat and movement is still a holy grail, and *Bourne* could yet surprise us all.

The Bourne series is a cut above the typical espionage thriller, and if the signature spook resourcefulness within everyday environments works well the game may live up to its inspiration. High Moon's previous work on *Darkwatch* gives hope for something above a standard thirdperson action adventure, but whether Jason Bourne will stand a chance against Sam Fisher is another matter entirely.





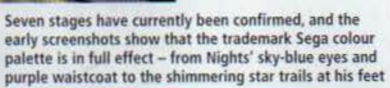




The Bourne character model bears little resemblance to Matt Damon, and several different combat and context-sensitive poses have been shown – ranging from the inevitable stealth approaches to environments (top) to close combat and shooting. The locations do seem more open than some of those from the films, however, and hopefully there will be a few more closed encounters







Seven stages have currently been confirmed, and the early screenshots show that the trademark Sega colour palette is in full effect – from Nights' sky-blue eyes and purple waistcoat to the shimmering star trails at his feet



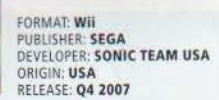




The aesthetics of *Nights* and the Wii seem like a dream pairing, and combined with some brilliant lunacy – such as Nightopia's ocean being in the air – could hit the perfect crossover between artistry and popularity, as well as accessibility and mastery

Nights: Journey Of Dreams

More than ten years after the original, has Nights finally found its perfect home?



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SONIC TEAM USA**
ORIGIN: **USA**
RELEASE: **Q4 2007**

N*ights* has always been an odd game, and more than a game: initially misunderstood for, basically, not being *Sonic*, it came to signify something about the Saturn and Sega itself. *Nights* became an emblem of a brighter past, with a focus on innovation, colour and sheer play for play's sake. As Sega staggered through the millennium, *Nights* remained in the background, a game with an aura of reverence for simply surviving untouched.

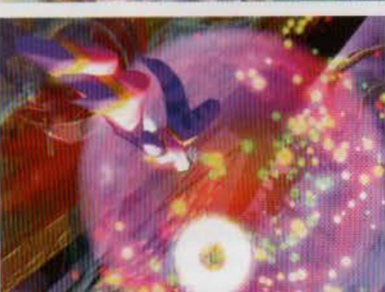
Over a decade later, in a marriage with the Wii made in heaven, *Nights* is back. It's tailor-made for the controls, and will be guided using the Remote, either solo or in conjunction with the analogue stick. In the original you controlled an effectively 2D flightpath, and the Remote should suit the 3D transition well.

Nights: JOD is set in the same world of Nightopia, and the children from the original – as well as Reala, Nights' evil counterpart – will return. The breeding side of the game, combining Mepians and Nightopians (and eventually raising a Superpian), will also feature, though there are no indications of the level of complexity. There are new features, of course: masks alter Nights' abilities, with a dragon mask to withstand gales, a dolphin mask for water, and a rocket mask for speed. But the most exciting nugget yet released is the use of the Forecast Channel. Considering the pioneering use that *Christmas Nights* made of the Saturn's internal clock (wintery themes and in-jokes such playing as Reala on April Fool's Day), if this doesn't involve Nights flying through its worlds with the weather outside your window, count us very surprised.

Nights: JOD will be responsible for more dream and nightmare gags than is decent over the next few months, but every bad pun will be worth it if Sega can just get it right. The gaming world has its collective fingers crossed.



After the PS3 and 360 *Sonic The Hedgehog*, Sega doesn't have a great record in updating its classic franchises, but every bad record has to end somewhere. We hope



The androgynous jester is as distinctive as ever, but so far none of the ground sections played as the children before Nights is located have been shown, though they have been confirmed. This was one of the few weak points in the original, and will hopefully be addressed in *JOD*



In the Nights, dream delight

Among the many reasons for optimism is the involvement of Naofumi Hataya as musical director. Hataya was a composer on the original *Nights*, and the haunting score was a large part of its excellence. In fact, part of the game's replayability was in the remixes awarded when going back to a cleared stage. Here's hoping for a return of the bagpipes.

Call Of Duty has always squeezed variety from its historical setting by flitting from arena to arena. *Modern Warfare* follows suit, giving you a taste of several conflict zones

Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Will Infinity Ward's shooter manage its fast-forward to the present day intact?

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **INFINITY WARD**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

Perhaps the heaving flow of World War II games is finally coming to an end. Developed once again by Infinity Ward, which has probably gone furthest in demonstrating the intensity and emotional resonance that World War II can provide in a videogame, *Call Of Duty 4* is set in the present day.

Having passed development of *COD3* to Treyarch, the studio actually began working on *Modern Warfare* straight after *COD2*. But though it retains many similarities to its predecessors, principally their distinctive depiction of the chaos of war, Infinity Ward's decision to avoid directly representing real-world conflicts has meant that *Modern Warfare* feels rather different. Instead of explicitly reproducing acutal events that are occurring today, the story here involves a renegade Russian nationalist named Zakiev who is attempting to bring his country back to its days of power.

The scenario means that *Modern Warfare* can be set in a more varied series of locations than earlier *CODs*, from Russia to the Middle East (craftily, one of the cronies is Middle Eastern, so the game can contain the requisite Iraq level). Infinity Ward has created further variety by ditching the series' campaign structure for an unfolding single narrative. Modelled on the likes of 24, it puts the player into the shoes of two main characters, an SAS soldier and a member of Force Recon, an American elite unit, along with several one-off characters and even some flashback sequences.

Each soldier's sections are made distinct by having allies behave differently. The SAS are quiet and efficient, while the Force Recon team is loud and gung-ho. Highly detailed character models reinforce the characterisation, slowly sweating and wearing watches that display the time.

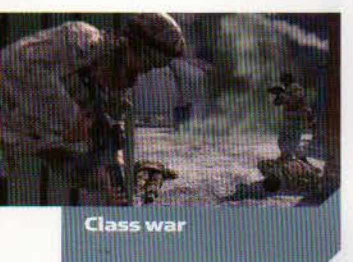
One level of *Modern Warfare* is set as a gunner on an AC-130 gunship, firing on targets through a thermal-imaging camera system that chillingly looks just like US footage of attacks on Taliban forces. Other grand set-pieces so far revealed include a night raid on a cargo ship by an SAS team during a storm and an Apocalypse Now-style attack by helicopters on a coastal Middle Eastern town. Infinity Ward promises that th defend sections, in which position must be held until relief arrives, will be more open, allowing for more emergent play.

Gun emplacements and the grenade warning symbol return, as do vehicles, such as the M1A1 Abrams tank. Naturally, a new range of equipment will also be available, which includes night-vision goggles, guns that shoot through walls, and the Javelin – an anti-tank weapon that fires a rocket which shoots up into the air before coming down directly on top of targets to take advantage of the weaker armour there.

Such ordinance begs the question of whether *Modern Warfare* can retain the close combat that *COD*'s vision of World Wa II so naturally afforded. Imaged and distant, modern warfare is so much less personal, and hardly under-represented in games. If this game really does mark the beginning of the end of games set in WWII, how long will it be before we miss them?



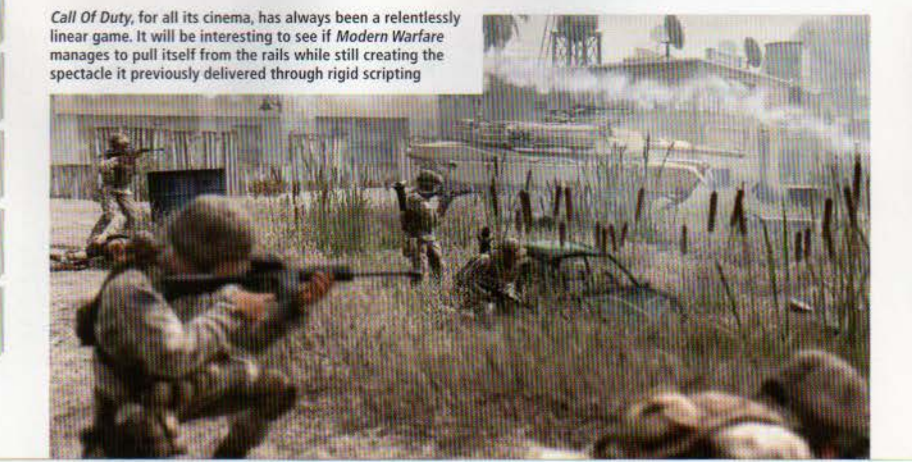
With *Ghost Recon*'s helicopter rides, and much else besides, already established as icons of the genre, it'll be a challenge for *Call Of Duty 4* to cut out a niche; not tha the series is unfamiliar with ploughing well-worn furrow



Class war

***Modern Warfare*'s multiplayer will return to a class-based system that will define the primary and secondary weapons players set out with. Deep customisation will be possible with the introduction of experience points that earn special abilities called Perks. Up to three can be equipped at a time, providing skills such as invisibility on radar, damage bonuses, silent movement and Last Stand, which gives a dying player a pistol for a last-chance opportunity to take out their attacker or even top themselves to steal their attacker's kill.**

Call Of Duty, for all its cinema, has always been a relentlessly linear game. It will be interesting to see if *Modern Warfare* manages to pull itself from the rails while still creating the spectacle it previously delivered through rigid scripting





FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **IREM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2007**

R-Type Tactics

Apparently the last game's title, R-Type Final, may have been a misnomer

Although Irem declared the PS2 game *R-Type Final* to have been the last in the series, few truly believed that it would be the last we would see of the franchise. But, rather than the glorious half-retirement of remakes and ports that some predicted, Irem is in the process of creating an all-new *R-Type* game for the PSP. How has the company managed to circumvent its rash announcement of the franchise's termination? Irem claims that the upcoming title, *R-Type Tactics*, isn't an *R-Type* game as we have known them in the past, and 'makes new' the series once again.

This assertion doesn't seem to be totally unwarranted, however, as *Tactics* ditches the fast-paced, side-scrolling pyrotechnics of previous titles and changes the stage into a hexagonal grid that determines your movement from turn to turn. Unlike in other *R-Type* games, where you took on the role of humanity's last desperate hope against an aggressive enemy invader, here the option for turn-based gameplay allows you to coordinate a large number of ships, each with their own equipment.


The new tactical direction the series is pursuing means you will be conducting larger-scale battles with ships of differing abilities, though clearly they promise to be no less explosive

As well as the Campaign mode, which sees you alternately complete objectives and then defeat bosses with the traditional escalation of scale and gun power, there's a Network mode which allows two players to confront one another head to head. However, it's far from assured that fans of the series will find the new direction at all appealing – the leap from finger twitching, sidescrolling mania to considered tactical wargame is a large one. In making the series new, Irem may well need to seek an entirely new audience.





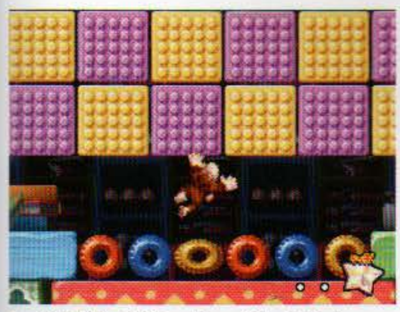
Once again, your foe appears to be the man-made weaponised lifeform gone bad; the living embodiment of humanity's most evil aspirations known as the Bydo Empire – all gooey innards, mechanical appendages and luridly coloured deathrays

DK: Jungle Climber

Donkey Kong comes to the DS in his first solo title since 2005

With the exception of the re-release on Wii's Virtual Console of a number of NES and SNES titles, Donkey Kong hasn't had a game all to himself in a while. Effectively the successor to the Game Boy Advance game *DK: King Of Swing*, *Jungle Climber* sees a rebirthing of the same shoulder-button gameplay on the DS.

As with *King Of Swing*, clicking the shoulder buttons causes Donkey Kong to grab with either the left or the right hand.

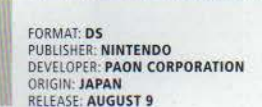

As with *DK: King Of Swing*, there will be plenty of enemies – however, your new attack move should make dealing with them far less awkward than before

Once he has a handhold, Kong will swing, allowing you to release and grab with the other hand, so propelling the ape onwards – and, more to the point, upwards, since, with the DS's two vertically stacked screens, the game has been redesigned to emphasise that dimension. Pressing both buttons causes Donkey Kong to grab with both hands and charge up a jump, which is activated upon release. The introduction of a separate attack button suggests that developer Paon has also tweaked *King Of Swing*'s control scheme.

Gameplay centres on collecting objects as you climb and evade enemies, this time framed with the purpose of helping aliens shaped like bananas. There are more than 25 stages, along with copious minigames and bonus stages. Also returning is the multiplayer, allowing up to four players to compete in the minigame modes.

It's interesting to see Donkey Kong taking a starring role again, rather than simply as one of an ensemble cast, and hopefully Paon has successfully addressed the issues that made *King Of Swing*'s innovative control method a tad cumbersome.





FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **PAON CORPORATION**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUGUST 9**


DK: Jungle Climber's movement is less about left, right, up or down and more about clockwise and anti-clockwise, judging when to release your hold to propel Kong onwards

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (STUDIO LIVERPOOL)**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Wipeout Pulse

The venerable future racer renovates its ageing tournament structure





Tracks have black and white versions, depending on which way they are raced around. They were specifically designed to be reversible, complete with alternate routes, a decision that Buckley says was a big challenge for the designers

Stat happy

Fans of *Pure*'s statistics screen will be spoilt by *Pulse*'s, which will feature a huge amount of number crunching. Multiple screens of figures describe player habits and tendencies, like what proportion of weapons have been absorbed, damage taken or number of perfect laps. The idea is to port this data to the *Pulse* website so, for instance, it can track ship loyalty to produce charts that compare average speeds between tribes of players that favour certain ships. "There's so much we want to do on the website with this sort of content," says Buckley.

"Pure was a bit repetitive to say the least," says **Tony Buckley**, its producer and now game director of its successor, *Pulse*. "It was a launch title; if we had more time…" he trails off. *Pure* was a vital early support to the PSP, exhibiting high-fidelity visuals and a roster of downloadable tracks, music and ships. But, though hardly incomplete, neither was it, structurally, 'next generation'. In fact, *Pure*'s austere succession of races through each track and speed class was anachronistic – pure to *Wipeout*'s roots, perhaps, but hardly to its future.

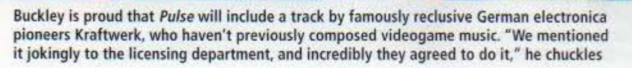
Pulse is SCEE's solution, an attempt to update *Wipeout*'s structure to match its still-captivating futuristic aesthetic and fluid race style. As such, there's little real change to the fundamentals of racing. Handling has been tweaked, and its 12 new tracks and 16 new Zone tracks feature a new addition, the Mag Strip, a section of track that automatically clamps ships to it, allowing upside-down sections and sequences of humps. *Pulse* also introduces four new weapons but retains the ability to absorb weapons into shield power found in *Pure*. The slowest speed class, Vector, has been removed, but three difficulty settings, which apply to the efficiency of AI racers rather than the driving model, have been added. It features that post-*PGR* staple, a photo-taking mode, and downloadable material is likely to be made available, too.

As a series of tweaks and minor additions to a formula that's now over ten years old, it's easy to initially find *Pulse* underwhelming. But its overhauling of the singleplayer mode has given it a new lease of life. Variety is now the key – each level in the campaign mode is made up of a grid of events taken from seven game types, which include races with or without weapons, elimination races and time trials. Grids will mix a range of speed classes, too, and can be completed at any difficulty level. "It's about introducing players to the different tracks and game types and giving them more choice," says Buckley.

Playing through the campaign unlocks tracks in Race Box, a second play mode. Here, players can create their own single races and full tournaments, which resemble the campaign mode's grids, specifying where and how they play out, target times for time trials and so on. The key is that these settings can be sent to other PSPs, either locally or through *Pulse*'s website, access to which is built into the game. How this will work remains to be agreed – Buckley is concerned that impossible-to-achieve setups might mar the experience – but the idea could add new depth to the game. In the same spirit of 'user-generated content', players will also be able to design liveries through the website.

Perhaps *Pulse* is the game *Pure* should have been, but that's probably an unfair judgement. Excellent online integration looks as if it will represent another interesting refinement to the series – with multiplayer, ghost downloads and online leaderboards also promised, *Pulse* looks as if it will be a thoroughly complete package.




Buckley is proud that *Pulse* will include a track by famously reclusive German electronica pioneers Kraftwerk, who haven't previously composed videogame music. "We mentioned it jokingly to the licensing department, and incredibly they agreed to do it," he chuckles



Seaman 2

Vivarium's sequel to the oddball pet game looks to be less of a queer fish





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **VIVARIUM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

The first *Seaman* was one of the most iconic games for the Dreamcast. An invention that was as broadly popular as it was eccentric, the game saw you nurture acerbic chimerical beasts – animal bodies with human faces – through several stages of evolution. Beginning as parasitic organisms, your Seamen invade the body of nautili, before emerging from the corpses as fish-like creatures with human faces. After your Seamen breed and die, their offspring move on to land as amphibians. *Seaman 2* focuses on a stage of evolution beyond that – a race of tiny prehistoric humans no taller than 20 centimetres.

The sequel moves the setting from a tank to an artificial island created to the scale of its occupants. As before, you can instruct and comfort your Seaman using voice communication, although it is far less the focus of the game this time around, also introducing direct contact with the environment via a giant hand. Whereas the previous game had you acting as the Seamen's keeper, maintaining your charges' food supply and temperature, with *Seaman 2* your role is more like that of a god, illustrating your deific abilities with thunder and earthquakes. But, as before, you can educate your Seamen verbally; he will ask you about his environment, and you can introduce him to the modern world.

With *Seaman*, Vivarium created a technologically impressive game that captured the imagination of a wide audience, including many non-gamers. At first glance, it seems difficult for miniature prehistoric people to match the bizarre charm of the man-faced fish, being so much more of a mundane creation. Hopefully the sheer weirdness of the first game will be adequately replaced by the promises of social parody as your Seaman advances.

Initially, your Seaman is unable to communicate in language, instead talking in and responding to animalistic grunts and squeals which you will have to learn to replicate if you wish to tame the creature



SWAT: Target Liberty

The long-lived tactical shooter franchise comes to PSP, ditching firstperson for a retro top-down viewpoint

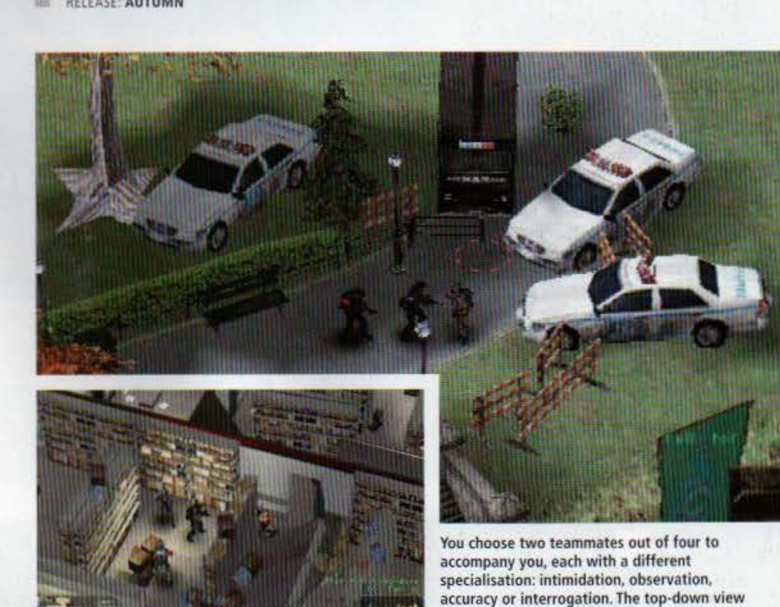
FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **3G STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

The top-down tactical squad game was a genre that seemed to get sadly swept away in the greedy technological advancement of the late '90s; the *SWAT* series is an indicator of that momentum, impetuously discarding the isometric for firstperson between its second and third instalments. Now, the success of classic ports to handheld consoles has proven that such dead genres, though limited by technology, had a genuine value that was lost with the move to more visceral shooters.

So, justly, they have been resurrected: the latest *SWAT* title, now gracing the PSP, gives the franchise a chance to revisit the external camera that typified games like *SWAT 2*, *Jagged Alliance* and *X-Com* – although now rendered in true 3D and fully moveable. *SWAT: Target Liberty* is a completely original game built specifically for the handheld. Though it harks back to those tactical isometric titles, and, like previous games in the series, is heavily informed by the expertise of law enforcement consultants, its emphasis is on faster-paced gameplay – perhaps taking more liberties with realism. Similarly, the game is furnished with a dramatic storyline, penned by The Shield's executive producer Scott Rosenbaum.

Leading a squad of three men, each of whom has skills and stats which level up as you progress, you take on terrorists threatening to detonate a nuclear bomb in New York. Randomised AI placement makes the game's urban environments unpredictable and extends replayability – an idea that has been carried over to its multiplayer component in which the levels themselves are randomly generated.

However, far from being trigger-happy, *Target Liberty* intends to preserve the franchise's most distinguishing idea: many situations can be resolved non-violently, and, indeed, you are encouraged to do so. With *Killzone: Liberation* proving that the PSP lends itself well to this kind of retro viewing angle, the more restrained and stern *Target Liberty* has a chance to establish itself as both the major alternative to that game and also the refinement of the genre on a platform under-populated with similar titles.



You choose two teammates out of four to accompany you, each with a different specialisation: intimidation, observation, accuracy or interrogation. The top-down view suits the PSP in a way firstperson rarely does



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BLUE BYTE**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Settlers: Rise Of An Empire

Blue Byte steps up the living world for the sixth game in its city-building series

The progression of *The Settlers* has always been one of gradual refinement – the weighting of the game vacillating between city-building and strategic warfare with each version. The upcoming instalment places its emphasis in the former camp – this time massively expanding the degree to which your city is visually realised. The sprawling settlements of the previous games lacked the kind of visual and structural fidelity that is possible here; now the placement of roads, marketplaces and city walls follows a more credible urban configuration.

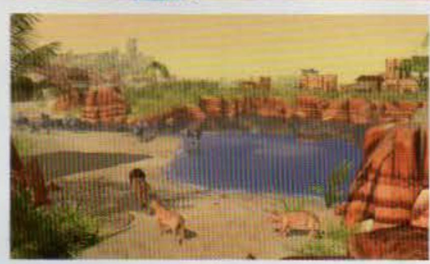
Whereas other city-building titles have been more loosely representative of your populace and its behaviour, here Blue Byte strives for total visibility of all your citizens and the economy of which they are a part. Each citizen consumes food, clothes and entertainment in ways that are observable – not simply as abstracted statistics, but played out in front of you. Every tree that gets cut down is an act of deforestation – each animal killed must become meat before it becomes sausage before it gets eaten.

Among the other details that enliven the world is a day and night cycle. The four climatic zones that you will play in all experience seasonal changes that affect your crop yields and animals as you would expect – rivers freezing over in the winter months, for example. A minor ecosystem is in evidence; kill too many zebras and the lions that prey on them may take your livestock, or your villagers.

As in *Settlers V: Heritage Of Kings*, the play is driven by knights, special characters whose development and particular skills are integral to the plot – but story is almost an irrelevancy when each stage is defined by the same process: build city, thwart attacks, defeat enemies.

The return of multiplayer is welcome – but you must wonder where the franchise is heading when titles like *Anno: 1701* offer similar experiences but with stronger trade and exploration. The game's strong suit is its realisation of a living world, but this detail will have to make a profound impact on gameplay in order to set the game apart from its competition.

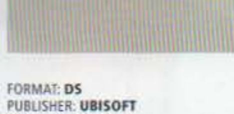




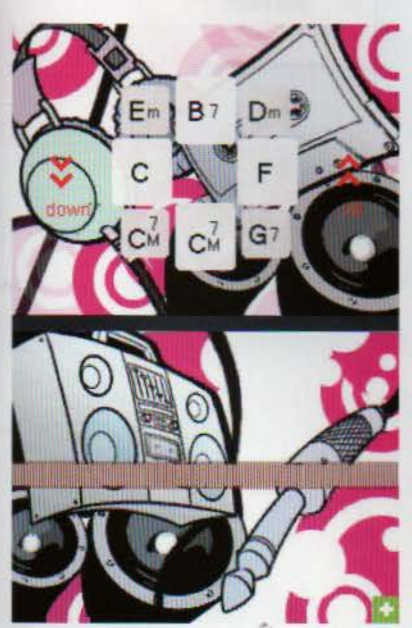
This time around you have to choose between knights, weighing up the various benefits they offer. Some, like the portly fellow above, are good at entertaining, obviating the need to build specific venues; other knights specialise in bartering so you can get lower prices

Jam Sessions

Plato redesigns popular strum-sim Hiite Utaeru DS Guitar M-06 for the western market



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **PLATO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**



The only difficulty is, as ever, with the diagonal directions on the D-pad. Shifting the weight of your thumb around is an adequate means of input until you go uptempo, when it's just not precise enough to avoid bum notes

Although the mention of the phrase 'family friendly' may have had many journalists at the Ubidays event looking at their watches and thinking about the free bar, Ubisoft's selection of casual games actually concealed one of the most exciting projects on show. *Jam Sessions*, developed by Plato, uses the DS to play, compose and record songs – using the stylus to strum a chord, which is selected from a predefined palette by the D-pad. The direction and speed with which you move the stylus across the screen affects the volume and timbre of the chord in an intuitive and realistic fashion.

The audio quality is surprisingly authentic for something emitted from a handheld console, apparently modelled on the sound of Santa Cruz guitars – in fact, when played through an amp, it sounded almost indistinguishable from an actual guitar. With a wide range of reverb and distortion effects, the sound can be modified indefinitely.

It's highly accessible even to novices at music, as you would expect from a casual game, and comes with a tracklist (varying depending on localised versions) of around 20 increasingly difficult songs that tutor the player in the use of the DS as an instrument. But once you've had your ear and fingers trained, the importance of the tracklist diminishes in favour of encouraging the player to create their own songs, employing the DS as a musical notebook and allowing the player to record their playback, along with a vocal part.

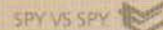
Although the use of the DS as a guitar simulator is not new – it is the mechanic around which *Jam Sessions'* Japanese predecessor was based – Plato's new game offers a revised interface with its functionality extended to emphasise its use as a recording tool.

It's ambitious, and proves that Ubisoft is thinking hard about the so-called casual market – where many efforts have stopped with accessible but ephemeral experiences, it is really attempting to permanently engage new audiences by using its games' accessibility as an entry point for a creative experience that can be as rich and deep as the player wants.



The available notes can be doubled by combining the left shoulder button with the D-pad, making up to 16 notes accessible at any time. It's more than enough for most pieces, and probably four times what you would need to play the entire Pete Doherty back catalogue





SPY vs SPY

FORGET THE GRIND-HEAVY FANTASY OF MMOS PAST AND PRESENT – THIS GENRE WILL SELF-DETONATE IN FIVE... FOUR... THREE... TWO... ONE...

When developers of MMOs that aren't *World Of WarCraft* talk about their games, they're always quick to emphasise that there's "still a lot of space" left in the genre. As true as this may be, you have to wonder why so few games are willing to fill it, preferring to endlessly regurgitate Tolkienesque settings of total imaginative desolation. Sony Online Entertainment Seattle, however, may just be about to blow the genre wide open – spurning elves and goblins for a near-future setting that's centred on the glamour and excitement of espionage.

"The goal for *The Agency* is pretty simple," says the studio manager of SOE Seattle, **Matt Wilson**. "We want to give the players the ability to live the life of an agent. What that means for us is really taking the best of movies that are out there – James Bond, the Bourne series, and TV shows like 24 and Alias, and really deliver on the intrigue, the action, the over-the-top moments."

While the development team may list the gritty violence of films as a source of inspiration, its approach is assuredly tongue-in-cheek, owing more to spy-spoofs like Austin Powers and *No One Lives Forever* than it does to the vicious conspiracies of 24.

"We love action and espionage films," says the game's lead designer **Hal Milton**. "We especially love it when they don't take themselves absolutely seriously. There are already plenty of amazing companies producing fine serious tactical simulations that make realism and grit their focus. We're not about simulation, we're about having a great time in a fun place you want to be a part of."

Visually, this self-satire is reflected in the light-hearted, caricaturist style given to the settings and characters. It's an approach that should guarantee the game's appeal to a much larger audience than if SOE had fallen back on the po-faced steroidal machismo that is the common crutch of games

TITLE: **THE AGENCY**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (SOE SEATTLE)**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**



Hal Milton, lead designer, despairs at the current lack of diversity in MMOs: "You're either into fantasy, sci-fi or free-form socialisation. You don't really have any other options right now"

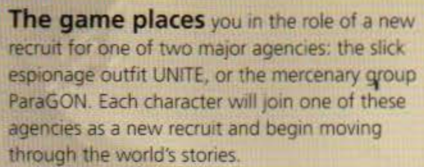
that deliver a similar degree of explosive action. In fact, not content with delivering a radically different aesthetic to most other MMOs, *The Agency's* focus on action is another area in which the game departs from the genre's conventions, attempting to provide the player with the kind of immediate carnage you would expect from a firstperson shooter.

Wilson explains: "We got started on this IP when [SOE president] John Smedley came up and talked to us about creating an MMO 'for the rest of us', as he put it at the time. For us that meant targeting that mainstream audience, really trying to take the best of singleplayer gaming and mixing that with the online persistence that massively multiplayer games are known for. The first idea we came up with was to take the action elements that console shooters had been famous for and marry that with where MMOs were going, building that online persistent world where we can do the action storytelling that you're used to in singleplayer games."

"One thing that struck us is how people immediately get what we're doing and where they fit within our game," explains Milton. "As opposed to having to go through voluminous lore explaining why Eldar the Mechanroth traversed the Sponal Ruidark to recover the lost Hadrach of Thrumvillia, or why the Class V Maser Field was integral in dissolving the Urlian Sector Trade Agreements following the NanoCrisis of 3564, we get to simply state: 'Live the life of an elite agent'. You don't really need to know any more to understand what's in store for you. Who doesn't want to have the tricked-out sports car, or the secret arsenal of exotic weapons or the roster of operatives waiting for your orders? It's familiar, it's immediate, and it's fun."







The game places you in the role of a new recruit for one of two major agencies: the slick espionage outfit UNITE, or the mercenary group ParaGON. Each character will join one of these agencies as a new recruit and begin moving through the world's stories.

"The world itself is structured around the two main headquarters for the parent agencies," explains Milton. "Then we open up public and private areas in multiple parts of the world. There will be combat and non-combat activities scattered throughout the public and private areas which are connected via a hub-and-spoke network of travel points. You'll unlock a variety of travel mechanisms, challenges and activities by exploring the world and performing missions to improve your character's standing within UNITE or ParaGON."

Milton lists a few of the possible tasks with which you will find yourself faced, giving a sense of the flavour and range of adventure: infiltrating enemy organisations to steal information or perpetrate sabotage; taking out a paramilitary madman and his goons in the jungles of South America; rolling the dice at the casino in Monaco.

At several points Milton throws about the mantra "fun now, no waiting." It's a mission statement that clearly signposts a significant step away from a genre which often requires lengthy orientation followed by tedious level grinding.

"Rather than climbing up an endless hill, here it's more about expanding your access to, and influence over, the people, places and things in the world. Unlike a traditional MMO, health and armour values in a shooter can't change too dramatically over time, otherwise you lose the expected dynamics of the shooter environment. Case in point: if I were to shoot someone in their



Matt Wilson, studio manager of SOE Seattle, is keen to see MMOs expand beyond their genre constraints and predicts that persistance will soon become a ubiquitous feature of games



The spy genre was irresistable, says Milton: "Many of our team members have worked on multiple fantasy and science-fiction MMOs before, and were ready for a change of pace"

head several times with a pistol, I would expect that to maybe be a bit of a bad thing, regardless of how long they've played. In a traditional MMO, if that enemy were a high enough level, then not only would any damage be insignificant, but the odds of that damage even passing through their Elite Armour of Superior Armouring are very low.

"We want to avoid that behaviour. Our philosophy is that 30 level-one players will take down a max-level player – he or she will just take out a few more of them before that happens, while pulling off some incredibly cool skill-driven moves, or deploying a high-dollar gadget or two."

It's a mindset that's evidently been applied to many of the systems in the game. The class system, a staple of the MMO genre, has been radically rethought in order to make it as streamlined, accessible and non-punitive as possible.

"Most online games have this rigid class system," says Milton. "It's kind of this remorseful affair where if you don't know all the details upfront you may waste hours of your life playing a character you don't agree with."

SOE's response to this is the user-friendly 'You Are What You Wear' system. "You want to go do straight-up combat then put on your combat outfit," Milton explains. "You want to be stealthy about it then put on your stealth outfit. And if you want to support other people while you're doing that and still have a chance to shoot a few guys, the support role is for you."

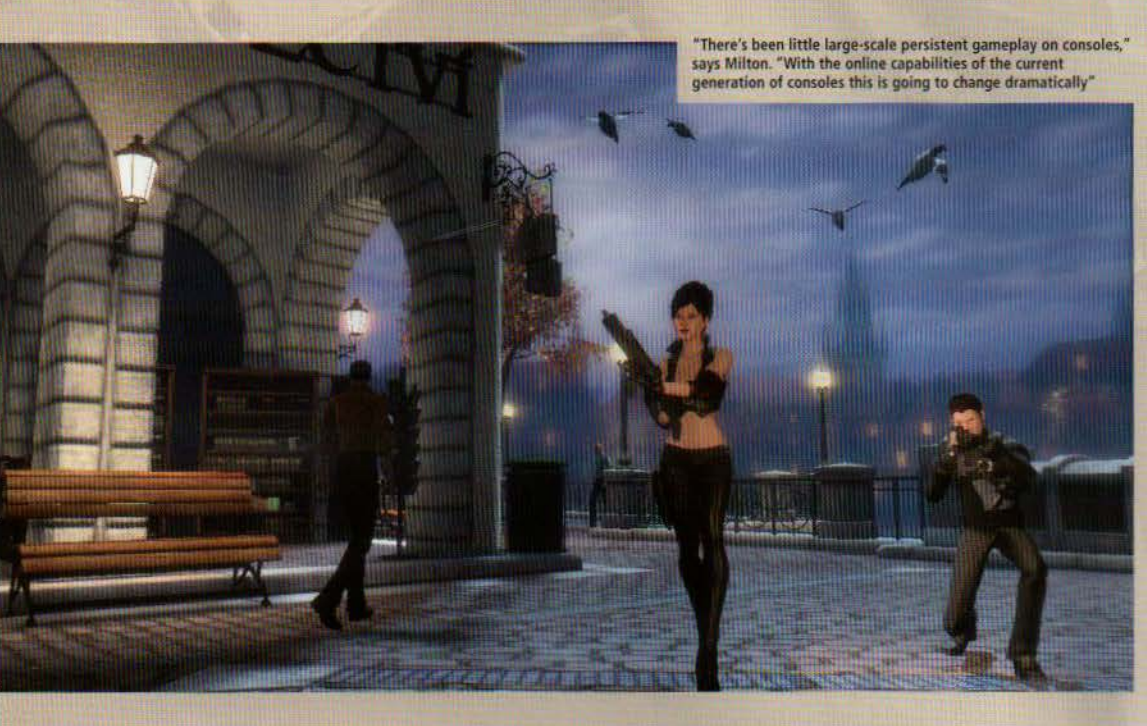
"THINK OF IT AS BEING LIKE JACK BAUER'S SUPPORT NETWORK"

So much of what makes the MMO genre appealing is based upon the extent to which the games are shaped by your input. It seems to be in keeping with this that *The Agency* avoids punishing the player for wanting to approach the game in a style of their own choosing. As well as allowing the player to change his or her gameplay style as easily as their clothes, the idea that the game structure is there to service the player's desires is carried forth in another major innovation.

"One of the larger components of the game is being introduced to the concept of building your own agency," says Milton. "Throughout our world there are a series of characters that you will actually be able to collect. They'll form the foundation of your own agency." Not only does this feature progress the storyline and push forward the player's development and personalised experience, but it also acts as an elegant answer to the oppressively time-consuming occupations like crafting that you might find in other MMOs.

"Think of it as being like Jack Bauer's support network," explains Milton. "You can task them

The game has a while to go in development yet, but already looks unusually slick for an MMO. No doubt this results from Dangel's art direction, lending the setting a distinctive brash style



"There's been little large-scale persistent gameplay on consoles," says Milton. "With the online capabilities of the current generation of consoles this is going to change dramatically"



off on assignments, and they'll push through those assignments whether or not you're actively playing."

"You're not going to have to sit around to click the button 500 times," chips in art director **Corey Dangel**.

Their utility, however, extends beyond crafting, blurring the line between tool, plot objective and support unit. Milton suggests a few of the ways you can address their services in game: "Give me a SAT-scan of the area; tell me where the enemies are. I can't get through this electronic lock; hack into their system and get me past their security defences."

At later points in the game you'll receive notification that their crafting tasks have been completed: the super-car you instructed to be built is now complete and ready to collect, or their surveillance of a group of shady characters has yielded results. Equally, however, you might be notified that your operative has been captured and offered for ransom – opening up a sub-mission in which you can choose to rescue your assistant.

This process of character development need not be a solo activity, however, as Milton explains: "If you want to take it one step further, you can join with your friends to create joint agencies, where hopefully you get to engage in some world domination. We're developing a number of ideas related to this that we're going to keep pretty close to our chest for the time being. However, keep in mind that when you create an agency, or join with your friends to create a joint agency, these entities don't just exist in a save-game somewhere or as a new category in your friends list. The gameworld knows about you. It knows how powerful you are, it knows how powerful you're becoming, and it will have a series of challenges that will test your resolve over time."

It's certainly refreshing to see someone innovating in the MMO space, and particularly pleasing to see SOE Seattle creating a game that deviates from the many clichés that its parent company first originated with *EverQuest*.

"This is the future of online gaming," states Wilson. "In the future we probably won't use the classification MMO any more; it'll be a basic principle that games have online persistent worlds of which to be a part."

It's certainly true that the idea of persistent worlds has much to offer beyond an interminable grind of rat-filled sewers and dwarven mines – and it's through projects like *The Agency*, which seek to intermix a variety of genres, and attract new audiences to the online arena, that the potential of online gaming will be expanded.

"THE GAMEWORLD KNOWS YOU. IT KNOWS HOW POWERFUL YOU ARE"

BONDAGE

One of the ways in which *The Agency* delivers on its promise of instant, over-the-top action is through what Milton calls 'Agency Moments' – interactive set-pieces in which you're suddenly thrown into a highly acrobatic sequence or explosive cinematic gunplay. The example we've seen saw two players, one a lithe UNITE spy and the other a brutish mercenary from ParaGON, leap on to a carousel and gun down a sudden surge of enemies as it span round and round – the camera angles moving out to enhance the cinematic cool of the sequence. "It makes you feel like a hero," says Milton.

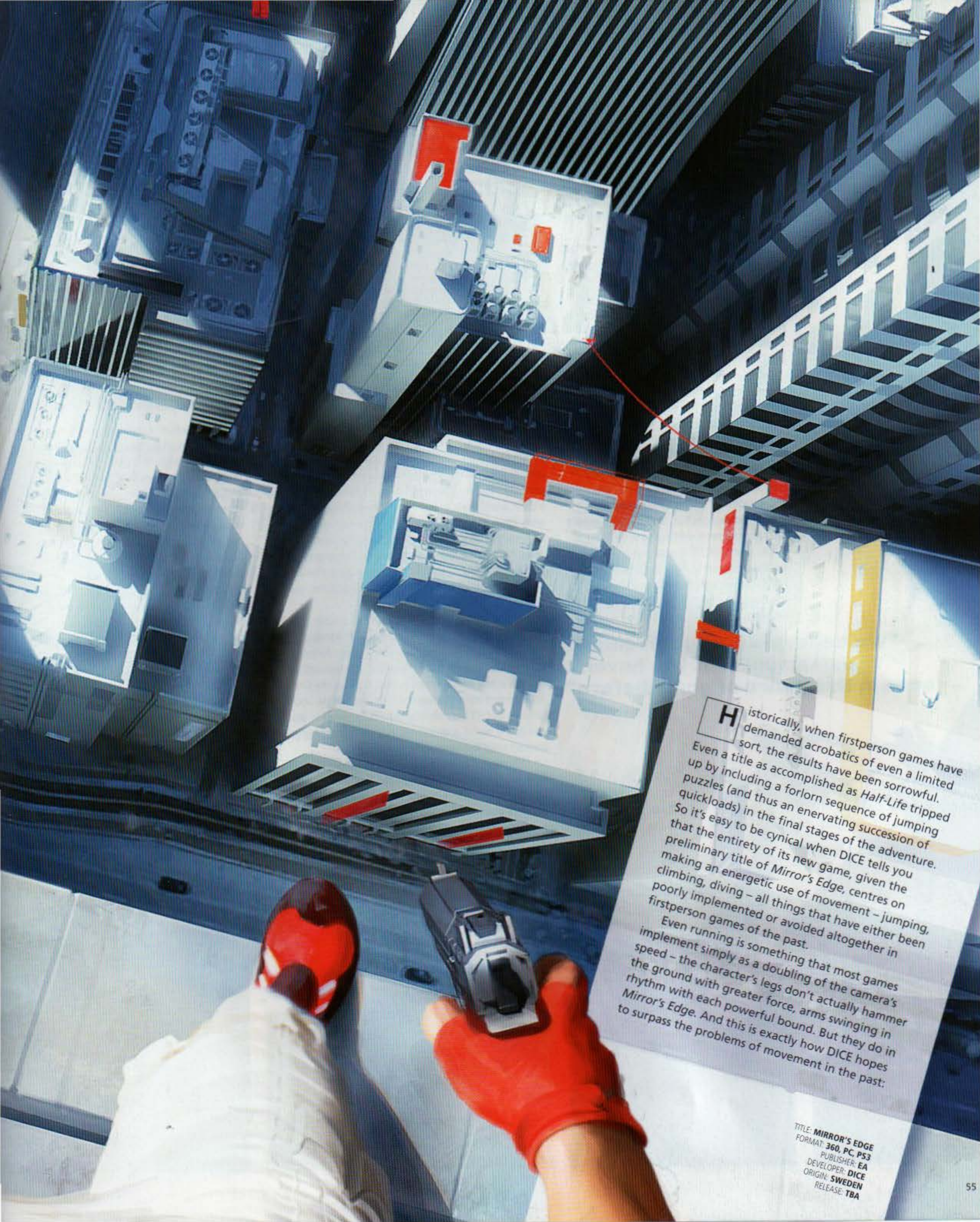






Leap of Faith

DICE's new parkour-inspired adventure jumps at the chance to rehabilitate a much-denied aspect of firstperson games: the person itself



Historically, when firstperson games have demanded acrobatics of even a limited sort, the results have been sorrowful. Even a title as accomplished as *Half-Life* tripped up by including a forlorn sequence of jumping puzzles (and thus an enervating succession of quickloads) in the final stages of the adventure. So it's easy to be cynical when DICE tells you that the entirety of its new game, given the preliminary title of *Mirror's Edge*, centres on making an energetic use of movement – jumping, climbing, diving – all things that have either been poorly implemented or avoided altogether in firstperson games of the past.

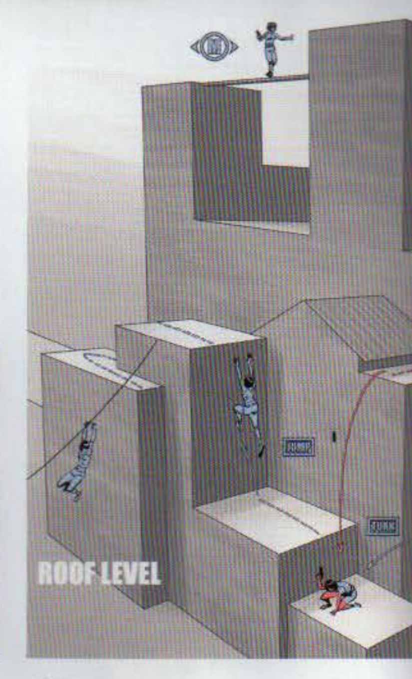
Even running is something that most games implement simply as a doubling of the camera's speed – the character's legs don't actually hammer the ground with greater force, arms swinging in rhythm with each powerful bound. But they do in *Mirror's Edge*. And this is exactly how DICE hopes to surpass the problems of movement in the past:

TITLE: **MIRROR'S EDGE**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **TBA**





Development is headed up by (left to right) Tobias Dahl, lead animator; Tom Farrer, producer; and Owen O'Brien, senior producer. All three are quick to sing the praises of their team's imagination and can-do attitude. O'Brien says that the two most common phrases in the office are "Wouldn't it be cool if..." and "How can we do it?"



by creating an acutely physical sense of the player's body within the environment.

It's something of a strange paradox that firstperson games, while placing you more directly in the gameworld, mostly offer fewer options for interaction with your environment than thirdperson games. The reason for this, however, is not terribly obscure – there is simply less visual feedback in firstperson to tell the player what his or her digital body is doing. It's no surprise then that most firstperson games, lacking an ability to convey your physical presence in the environment, tend to reduce the avatar in question to a floating gun. That such titles then feature shooting as their métier is an inevitability: it's an interaction based on line-of-sight, the appreciation of which is enhanced by the firstperson perspective, and doesn't require radical movement within the world.

As such, DICE's decision to name the nimble protagonist Faith begins to seem particularly appropriate for a character representing both the literal and figurative embodiment of the team's vision – one which happily flouts convention in a way that must demand a substantial amount of self-belief.

"At the start, everybody thought: 'Yeah, that sounds cool, but it's not going to work'," says senior producer **Owen O'Brien**. "A lot of other people have tried it and failed, and this is why we think we've got something really innovative, because we've overcome all these hurdles and got something that really works now. We believe we've got freedom of movement that you haven't seen in this genre of game before – it's more like what *Prince Of Persia* has done, but in firstperson."

"There's always been a lot of focus on the gun in firstperson games," says producer **Tom Farrer**, ruefully. "No one puts that much focus on the movement; how you move around the environment. We wanted to capture a real sense of physicality. Games like *Unreal Tournament* have movement – double jumps, rocket jumps – but it's very abstracted. We wanted to place you in the world and convey the strain and physical contact with the environment."

O'Brien describes the game's philosophy as a "through the character" experience rather than a "through the gun" experience. "The aspirations of that are that you have a body, that the camera movement is organic – and it should feel like it's really you, it should feel fluid and realistic. We wanted to work, not on creating bigger and better and more intricate weapons, but on really bringing in the hands of the person."

The task of projecting a sense of embodiment falls largely in the lap of **Tobias Dahl**, the lead animator on the project. It's a change in emphasis that requires a rethinking of the usual expenditure of the polygon budget. "What you usually see when you look at the hands in firstperson shooters is that you have a big loss of volume when it comes to the lower arms, the knuckles disappearing and so on," he explains. "I would say most of the firstperson shooters just ignore the hands and focus a whole lot on the weapons. We have projects at DICE where we have lead weapon artists and a crew under him or her to develop the shaders for the weapons – but then you have these low-polygon cubic hands holding the weapons. We focused on the hands from the start. So we have no loss of volume, we have veins showing and knuckles that grow depending on how the hand is bent. In a normal firstperson game you have about 30 animations for the hands – right now, I think we're up to 300."

The game does feature guns, however, but they act more like tools rather than as the focus of the game. "Principally, this is an action adventure," says O'Brien. "We're not positioning this as a shooter – the focus isn't on the gun, it's on the person. As the marketing is saying, it's 'putting the person back into firstperson'. So it's all about you, it's about the movement."

CLUB FOOT

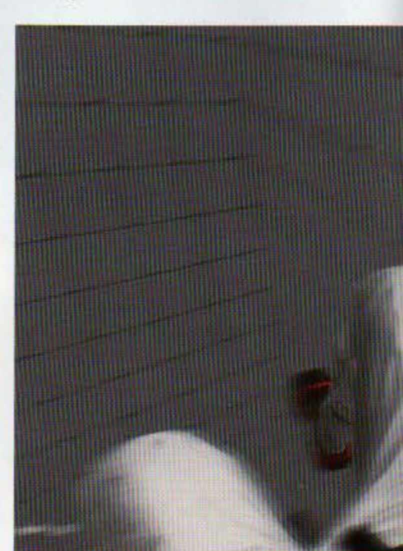
As different from *Battlefield* as *Mirror's Edge* is, it wouldn't be a DICE game without the inclusion of a compelling multiplayer component. Although the developer doesn't yet want to reveal the precise method by which this part of its game will work, it does transport the theme of chase evident in singleplayer to the team-based gameplay. Further longevity will be given to the singleplayer experience by the inclusion of time trials. Usually considered a perversion of intended gameplay, speed-runs here are to be enshrined within the game – and aptly so, given the emphasis on perpetual movement that *Mirror's Edge* entails.

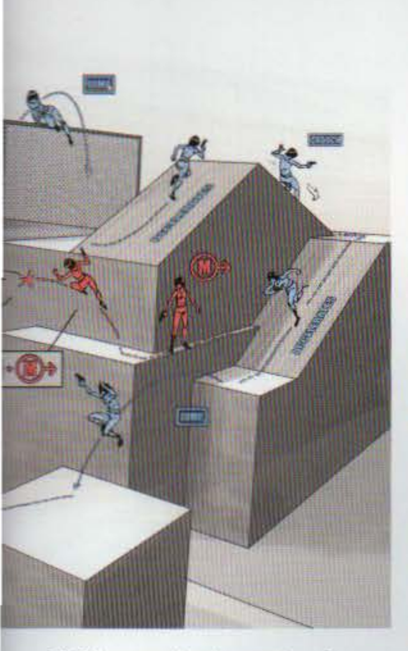
"We believe we've got freedom of movement that you haven't seen in this genre of game before"



The screens below are taken from a 'white room' – an undecorated test build. "I don't want to hide behind art," says O'Brien of this spartan demonstration. "The core of the game has to be fun in isolation. If it feels good and works well in a white room, then, once you start adding art to it, everything else is just a bonus on top of that"







DICE is aware that its promises of convincing digital embodiment are likely to induce scepticism, but with the 360 gamepad in hand, doubts about the extent of its achievement are rather abruptly demolished. Even just walking feels vividly realised in a way that firstperson games commonly don't. All too often, looking down, you will see your feet glide over the floor – if you have them at all; here, footfalls feel weighty, as though they are actually engendering movement. And when you speed up, the sense of acceleration is well matched by the sway of the camera, your arms pumping visibly, the sound of your trainers impacting concrete with a fluid increase in pace and power.

"The first thing we wanted to get was the feeling of actually sprinting, to get a feeling of speed and momentum in the game," says O'Brien.

And, well, it works – and this is before motion-blur or any other full-screen effects have been added to accentuate the feeling of movement. But it's not only the contact with the environment and



SPEEDVAULT

JUMP

If nothing else, at least *Mirror's Edge* will abolish one of the firstperson shooter's most enduring idiocies. "A wall in most games will stop you and you'll have to go around it," says O'Brien. "I've always wondered how you were meant to save the world when you couldn't even get over a metre-high fence"

the audiovisual feedback that makes the player feel so coupled with the avatar – crucially, DICE has nailed the sense of acceleration and deceleration. The latter is particularly obvious if you hit the crouch button while moving at speed – the avatar throws herself into a slide, feet outstretched in front (useful for evading slowly descending garage doors, for example), and, skidding to a gravelly-sounding halt, the viewpoint skews with plausible imitation of naturalistic head movement. It's all suggestive of a friction with the surrounding world that is simply absent from other firstperson games – and perhaps it takes an effort like DICE's to recognise that there even was a common disconnect occuring in the genre that needed to be addressed.

This sense of embodiment could easily have been frustrating – we're used to instant and constant run speeds in games, rather than having to labour to build up momentum. But the emphasis *Mirror's Edge* places on the physical exists simply to enable your athleticism, rather than to hinder it – allowing the player to perform stunts of grace and energy that would have felt clumsy were the player's agency more abstracted from the environment.

"A lot of the moves you do are parkour moves," says O'Brien. "We decided fairly early on in development that we wanted to do a game that was based in an urban environment, positioning it away from military and war and the big open spaces of *Battlefield*. We started off prototyping in *Battlefield 2*, and we found that one of the things we wanted to do we couldn't, which was to move around the city on foot – we found that vehicles were quickly abandoned. In the narrow city streets people drove them for ten yards, jumped out of them again and ducked down an alley, or ran up stairs or ran into the subways. We've got a very vertical world, and found that people wanted to move around that quickly on foot."

The result is fluid acrobatic movement – a continuing string of elegant wall-runs, leaps, vaults and the like that turns the urban environment of vertiginous walkways and roofs into an elaborate assault course.

"This is going to sound like typical developer hyperbole," says O'Brien apologetically, "but when you play this game for a while it changes the way you look at levels in other firstperson games. You stop seeing obstacles and start seeing opportunities: 'I could wall-run up there and jump there and do this and that'. Even on a very small rooftop everyone approaches it differently."

"Doing the cool moves is relatively easy," explains Farrer, "but you want to maintain a flow – that's where the skill element is introduced. Coming to the bottom of the zip-line you want to time your landing properly so you can continue to maintain that speed and carry on moving, whereas if you fail you may stumble, slow down or even fall over."

Similarly, when approaching a metre-high wall – which in other firstperson games might be an impassable structure – the velocity with which you hit it will enable you to vault straight over or, failing that, leave you hanging. Maintaining speed via fluid combinations of moves is the central tenet of the gameplay. Your average speed also determines the amount of Reaction Time you have, a slow-motion feature implemented to aid you in the more complex and rapidly chained moves. Although perhaps more obviously a gimmick than the game's other integrated notions concerning movement, it is certainly of some considerable benefit during the more hectic moments; when you launch yourself from the edge of a building and spin in mid-air to shoot back over your flying body at your pursuers, Reaction Time gives you a few critical moments to get a bead on your foes before you slam in to the ground.

"When you play this game it changes the way you look at other firstperson games. You stop seeing obstacles and start seeing opportunities"

"Aside from just considering how this was all possible technically," says Farrer, "we spent a lot of time thinking about what you'd be doing with the controller. We want to keep control of movement off the face buttons, because the second you use a face button you move your thumb off the analogue stick and you lose control of your aiming."

Although still undergoing development, the controls have been streamlined in other ways. There is no 'grab' button as such: the game uses a complex edge-detection system to allow you to automatically gain purchase on ledges. Only two buttons determine your context-sensitive actions. The jump button becomes an all-purpose movement button, executing vaulting manoeuvres as well as repelling yourself off adjacent walls. An 'aggression' button not only shoots, but allows you to barge down doors while moving at speed, or kick them open if standing still.

Combat maintains the focus on motion, as Farrer explains: "Your enemies are powerful and heavily armoured. They're dangerous – your pistol isn't going to do much damage to them. So what we wanted to do is to infuse movement into the combat – firstly in avoiding your enemies; the more acrobatically you navigate the world, the harder a target you become.

"Alternatively you can get in close to them and turn their own weapons against them; snatching a weapon from them and using this more powerful gun to dispatch the harder enemies. We look at these larger weapons as temporary power-ups, because once



Grime, like crime, has been all but eradicated from the world. The crisp and draconian order with which the environments are rendered is reflected in the role of your sometime antagonist, a policeman named Miller (opposite). "Miller sums up the city," says O'Brien. "Cleanliness, and clinicalness with an underlying menace."



ELITE BEATING AGENTS

With its emphasis on timing to create ever longer strings of unbroken movement, it might seem that *Mirror's Edge* owes as much to games like *NiGHTS* as it does to any other firstperson title. DICE isn't afraid to borrow from other genres; the melee attack by which you pull the gun from your opponent's hands uses a minor element of rhythm-action gameplay. "You hold the aggression button down – that triggers the snatch move," says Farrer. "Then there's a short moment and a sound which tells you the optimum time to release the button and trigger the move. If you nail it, you'll perform a very fast move. And this will reward you – because if you are struggling for the weapon with your opponent, it might go off, and you'll be left with fewer bullets in the clip."

DICE clearly wants to launch the series on the strength of its female protagonist, hoping that she will achieve a status equivalent to Lara Croft. Only when we get a better sense of the narrative, and how Faith is placed in it, will we really know whether she has the personality to match her design

you take them you're limiting your mobility but increasing your power. It's an interesting trade-off. You can't carry around an enormous assault rifle while you're doing these athletic stunts."

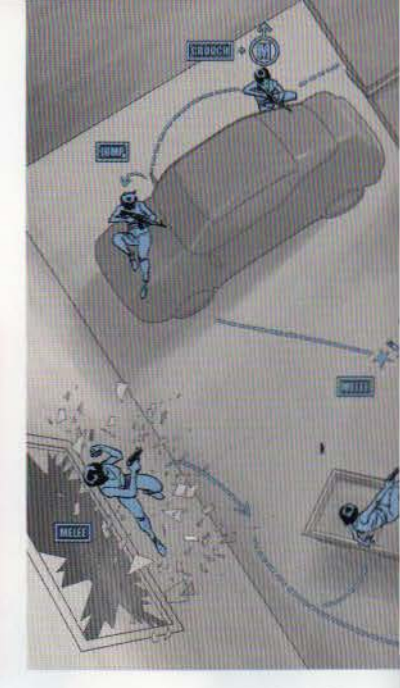
The game clearly isn't about dispatching endless thousands of bad guys, however – your enemies represent a real threat, and one that, for the most part, you must outrun rather than outgun. "One of the conventions we were interested in breaking was never putting enemies behind you," says Farrer. "Other firstperson games often have you moving towards your enemy, and clearing the threat. We wanted to give this idea of chase. The enemies aren't there for cannon fodder; they're frightening and powerful."

"And you're always chased by a horde of them," continues O'Brien. "You're outnumbered – there's no doubt that you need to be running."

This central premise of continuous acrobatic movement wouldn't work if the environments weren't designed to encourage and direct it. Yet, at the same time, the urban setting must remain convincing, necessitating a delicate balance between giving an impression of openness to the rooftop world, and making sure the player doesn't continually plummet to the tarmac far below. It's a balance made possible by the art direction the team is pursuing, one that is perhaps even bolder than its innovations in firstperson movement. It's an art direction that directly informs the gameplay while at the same time creating a vivid sense of the unique and intelligent backstory.

"Your character, Faith, has a Jason Bourne-style sense of potential escape routes," explains O'Brien. "We wanted to get that feel into the game, seeing the world as a she would see it; stripping out everything except that which would be important to her. We want





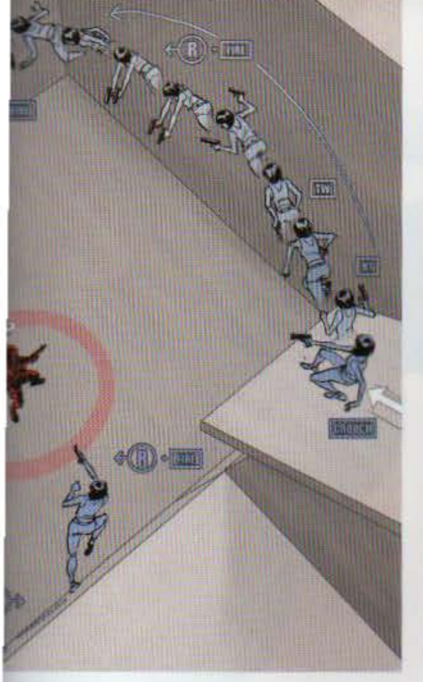
the player to move through the world very quickly, and we want the player to know what their options are. All the things that are important to you will pop out."

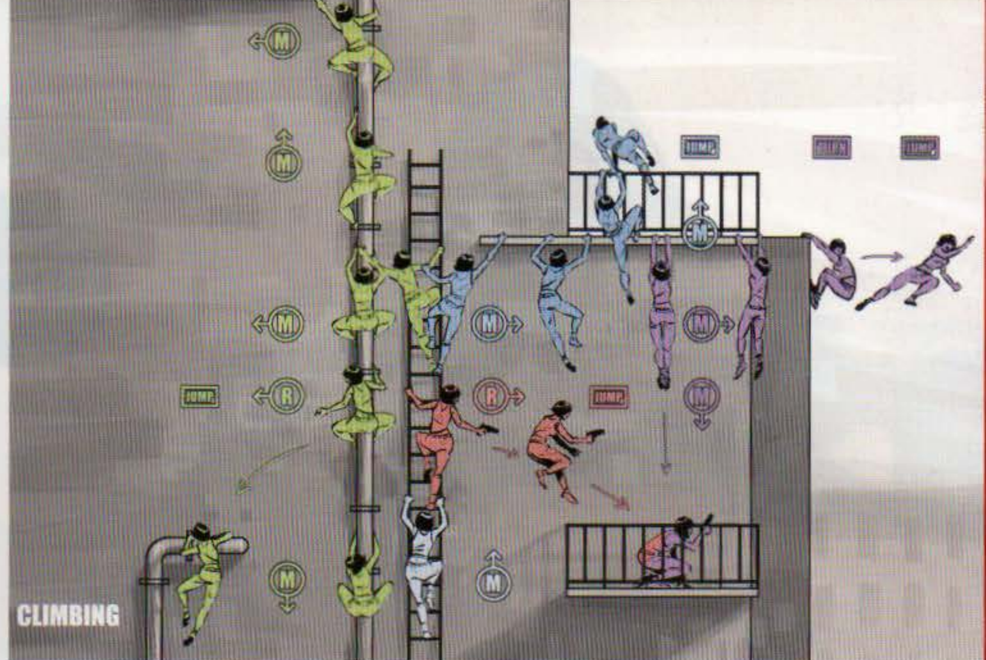
Potential paths and objects that Faith can use to propel herself through the environment are indicated with vibrant splashes of primary colour. Routes that will lead to certain death tend to be marked with shadow, while safe paths are illuminated, giving the player an instinctive sense of how to navigate the perilous rooftop paths without having to stop and check ahead.

Unusually, *Mirror's Edge* departs from the videogame industry's obsession with grim, gritty dystopias – and is all the more terrifying for it. In many ways a vision of aspirational urban design, the cityscape is a pristine utopian metropolis.

"Our city's a hybrid of east and west," says O'Brien. "It looks clean, attractive. It looks like a nice place to live. People seem to be happy. It's crime-free. It's almost a utopian city, but a modern city, a contemporary city. But this is the catch:







Although the game isn't free-roaming in the same way as *Crackdown* or *GTA*, the levels are pretty large. This is necessarily so: by virtue of Faith's adaptable approach to her environment, there is a staggering multiplicity of ways to approach every obstacle, and each level has various paths through it of different degrees of difficulty

it's fine for you so long as you're willing to be part of a system – it's actually a very controlled city."

There's a sense of underlying menace that is perfectly communicated by the city's sterile perfection, an austerity compounded by the splashes of primary colour, which begin to look like transparent attempts to enliven a world that is emotionally dead, its diversity stifled, its people subjected to draconian unity of thought and behaviour. The image of civil order that *Mirror's Edge* paints is a chilling extrapolation of policies being enacted today for the protection and comfort of citizens but which, all the same, signal a disturbing restriction of liberty.

"It's set in a fictitious city, but it's a city that could exist today," says O'Brien. "We've taken a lot of things that are happening in the world and amalgamated them and exaggerated some of them slightly. Some cities are already starting to be like this. There are congestion charges at the moment – we've taken that to the next step: vehicles need a licence which only the rich can afford, so movement by vehicle is very controlled. The city has clamped down a lot on internet traffic, and mobile phone traffic is monitored. The streets are safe to walk, but that's because they're patrolled by a very efficient, almost paramilitary police force."

But the fear of such authoritarian government is really a fear of that power being misused, as O'Brien explains: "Like any utopia, if you scratch the surface things start to fall apart. It's being run by a coalition of corrupt politicians and police, controlling the citizens for their own means. For me, this is the core of the game and the message, if it has a message: the greater good has come at the expense of personal freedom. It's what's happening around the world a lot. How much personal freedom are you willing to give up for a comfortable life? That's the crux of the game. A lot of people in this city don't even realise they're kept."

The protagonist, of course, is well aware of the city's oppressive order, and chooses to exist outside of it – or on top of it. Illicit behaviour, eradicated from the streets, is pushed upwards to the roofs, creating a criminal overground. With the means of communication so stringently monitored and restricted, criminality is served by a more low-tech mode of information transport – athletic couriers, known as runners, who can move around on foot, mostly at height. And in one such runner, Faith, they have found a protagonist of ambiguous morality, one who exists in a state of liminality, between corrupt authoritarianism and ferocious criminality. She is, as you might expect from the team's other nonconformist design decisions, an atypical game heroine.

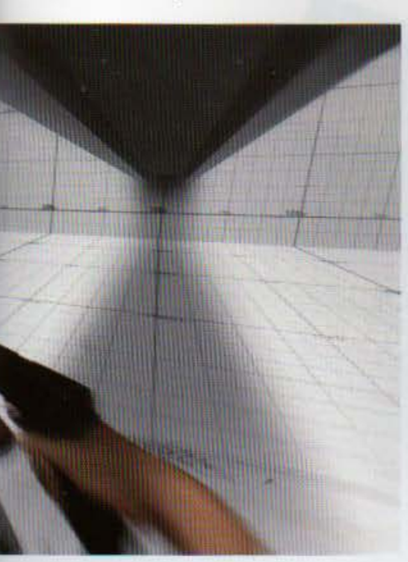
"We wanted to get a strong female character," says O'Brien, "one who didn't have pneumatic breasts and wasn't overtly sexual – someone who is strong and athletic but also realistic." Whether or not she will become iconic in the way the team hopes remains to be seen – but at least the attention the designers have given to her character should make you feel more comfortable inhabiting her body.

DICE clearly hasn't made easy choices in the creation of this new property, pursuing a design that deviates bravely from the firstperson groupthink. Not only should this disregard for convention be applauded for itself, but it is particularly important in a genre whose most recent mechanical innovation was *Marathon*'s implementation of free-looking mouse control 13 years ago.

"How much personal freedom are you willing to give up for a comfortable life? That's the crux of the game"

"If you look at thirdperson games there's been a lot of evolution there," says Farrer. "We haven't seen that in firstperson games." O'Brien continues: "I think what we're doing is cool and innovative, and we've broken a lot of taboos and overcome lots of problems – but I also think it's the next logical step for firstperson. Like most great ideas, once you've done them everyone goes: 'Well, yeah, why doesn't everybody do that?'"

And hopefully, once the game has demonstrated what is possible, not simply with the mechanics and presentation of firstperson movement but with the game's imaginative vision and politically informed narrative, others will follow suit. You've just got to have faith.










A BOARD'S TALE
EIGHT SKATEBOARDING GAMES IN AS MANY YEARS, ACROSS THREE GENERATIONS OF CONSOLES. WILL NEVERSOFT – CREATOR AND MAINTAINER OF THE TONY HAWK SERIES – EVER STOP?



Annually-updated franchises are frowned upon as much as relied upon, both golden calf and black sheep. That mix of familiarity and evolution is a powerful one, for gamers as much as game-makers, selling incoming consoles and propping up departing ones. Many modern, big-hitting franchises have managed to ride the past decade, but few manage to sustain a steadfast annual frequency without burning out or needing a fallow year or two to refuel both consumer enthusiasm and developer fertility. And Neversoft – the studio behind the *Tony Hawk* series, the persisting alpha male of the combo-sports genre – is still going at it, through PS1 to PS2 to PS3, from Xbox to 360; while there may have been trembles and creaks along the way, there's been no significant stumble, no wipeout.

After launching its figurehead skating title, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater*, in 1999 and maintaining a metronomic release schedule ever since (see page 69 for 2007's instalment, *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*), the studio is showing no visible signs of exhaustion, regardless of how its less forgiving fans may sometimes feel. Just how does Neversoft manage? Continual staff turnover? Overlapping development teams? Iron-rod management and caffeine drips?

Sitting down in the company's cavernous LA studio, the answer begins to emerge before the question has even been posed: Neversoft feels close-knit, upfront and as laid back as it can get away with. Five of the studio's most senior faces casually gather throughout the interview in the building's demo room, with little formality or fuss – president **Joel Jewett**, director of development **Scott Pease**, art director **Chris Ward** and co-project developers for the latest *Tony Hawk* title, **Brian Bright** and **Chad Findley**. As you'll soon discover, even the most innocuous or voxpop-like question leads to streams of Neversoft's historic, chatty consciousness. And nothing rounds off such a relaxed air as the company's in-house welcome mat, Jewett's charmingly rowdy pet husky Riley, falling asleep upon your feet just as the dictaphone is switched on, like some well-oiled PR manoeuvre.

So, how does Neversoft cope?

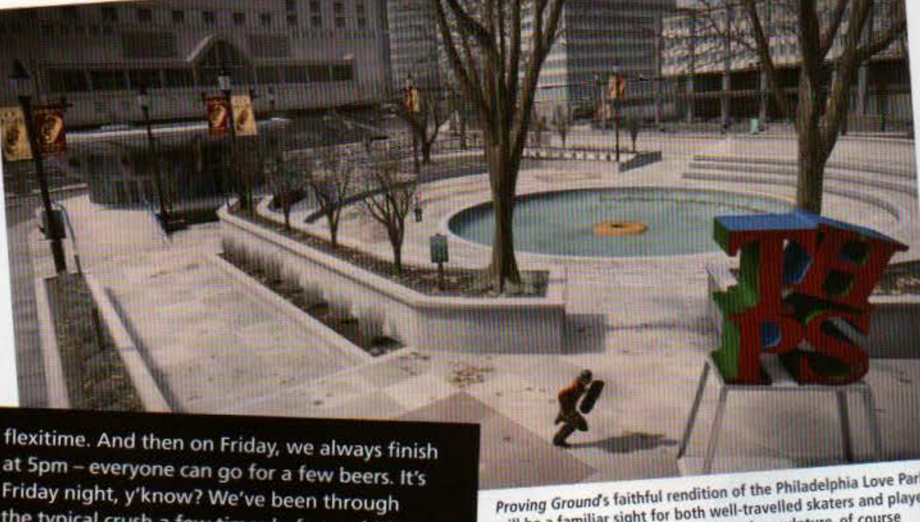
Chris Ward: We try not to kill people; it's generally bad form. Burn them out, make them husks of the men they used to be, sure – but kill them? No. We don't work weekends. And, a few years ago, we introduced 'hardcore' weeks – when needed, we'd do 12-hour days and try and spread that crush over the entire length of the project. The deadline's 12 months out there, so instead of it getting to two months and us going 'Fuck!' and then burning people out, we try to spread it out. We definitely do believe that it's beneficial to get people to go home and have a life outside of Neversoft. Weekends are always off-limits. Company policy is that you go home then; you can come in if you want, of course. We'll do Monday to Thursday, 12 hours per day, on flexitime. And then on Friday, we always finish at 5pm – everyone can go for a few beers. It's Friday night, y'know? We've been through the typical crush a few times before, which is fine when you're younger, but about five or six years ago we brought this in, to meet monthly milestones.

Joel Jewett: It's also that we hold the process highly, and part of our culture is to get better at production management. At the same time, we work hard and play hard, let people have a lot of fun. Not working weekends, that helps keeps everyone motivated. And when you have this huge franchise... that can become like a drug – how can we let it fall down?

CW: We were the first company I've worked with that had an actual production staff. We suddenly got into this gear where we could actually produce games instead of fucking around for five months on just one level.

Chad Findley: The other part of that is just the quality of the guys who work here, especially in the earlier years. If something needed to get done, even if it wasn't your speciality, you'd help and make it work.

Scott Pease: We have a really high standard for talent, and we hire game-makers. We don't really hire producers or artists, but guys who really love making games, and make sure we uphold the standard of the franchise year in, year out.



Proving Ground's faithful rendition of the Philadelphia Love Park will be a familiar sight for both well-travelled skaters and players of *THPS2*. Well, except for the riff on the sculpture, of course

But development roles are demanding increasing specialisation, rather than a broad ability to simply muck in with freelance willingness; it's now common for many staff on a project to have not had, or be required to have, a gaming CV. Is it becoming trickier to maintain such a philosophy?

SP: It's gotten more difficult. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* involved around 13 guys. And now the team's 100+ people. But we've had the luxury of being able to slowly grow into that with each PlayStation console.

JJ: A lot of it comes back to the original clause of hiring the people who would do whatever it takes to make the best game possible, and then you can just breed off of that. And now we've got a bunch of guys that came from that, with tons of experience, and can build a killer team that has a great time making videogames. Another thing is that we get to ship a game every year – that's awesome, y'know? People come in from working on something for two and a half years that gets cancelled – that's awful, it's harsh.

"WE TRY NOT TO KILL PEOPLE; IT'S BAD FORM. BURN THEM OUT, MAKE THEM HUSKS OF THE MEN THEY USED TO BE, SURE – BUT KILL THEM? NO"

Have you maintained the same core team across every Tony Hawk game, then?

CW: Chad's been on since *Apocalypse* [released in 1998, starring Bruce Willis], for example.

JJ: There are about 20 guys that have been here for 5-10 years. We drew staff hard when we did *THPS2* and *Spider-Man*, then *Gun* and *THUG* at the same time, then you just taper off and find out who fits and who doesn't. And we've had another spurt with *Guitar Hero*.

SP: Just to give you a little history, I actually worked at Activision at the very beginning, and was over there when we were talking to Tony and trying to formulate a plan for a skateboarding game. This was in '98, roughly.

THPS3 may have been the first online PS2 title, but why did the series take so long to get to Xbox Live? "We only had so many resources and chose to put them in other directions, and the Live userbase was still in its infancy," clarifies Jewett



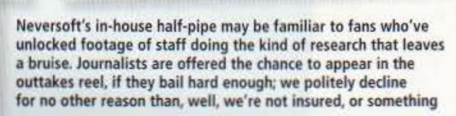






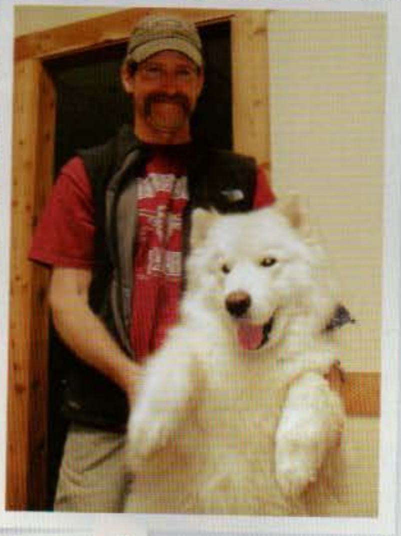


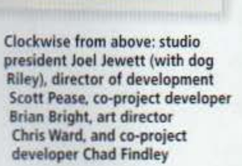




Neversoft's in-house half-pipe may be familiar to fans who've unlocked footage of staff doing the kind of research that leaves a bruise. Journalists are offered the chance to appear in the outtakes reel, if they bail hard enough; we politely decline for no other reason than, well, we're not insured, or something







Clockwise from above: studio president Joel Jewett (with dog Riley), director of development Scott Pease, co-project developer Brian Bright, art director Chris Ward, and co-project developer Chad Findley



O2 NOT 2B

Throughout 2002/03, Activision attempted to bolster its success with the *Hawk* series via its O2 range, an umbrella of well-hewn sports-action titles that took in surfing and wakeboarding among others, but met with limited commercial success. Were they not worth nurturing in a similar vein to skating? "Honestly, I think most of those games were fun to play," offers Bright, who worked on the majority of the O2 catalogue. "But it's a genre, one of expressing your creativity through combos. You've only got so many hard-earned dollars... half of your library's likely not going to be just racing games. You're often going to buy the premier brand, and in this case that's still *Tony Hawk*. There's still a perception that surfing, say, is cool, but some kid who buys his games in Wal-Mart in Kansas, it's just too far removed and so is inaccessible. He's not going to shell out his $50 to buy that, when he can get *Tony Hawk* and a similar sensation, but much closer to his reality."



Simultaneously, Activision was doing *Apocalypse* with Neversoft…

CW: I remember Bruce Willis's bald head. That's all I looked at for nine months.

SP: So that project finished up, and skateboarding – well, it was either that or bass fishing. We almost did *Pro Bass Fishing* for THQ. There's the defining moment right there.

CW: We even did golf for a while, and a rally game. Well, demos of.

SP: So, at that point we started making a demo, carved up *Apocalypse*'s city level and placed a snake grind in the middle of it, put Bruce Willis on the skateboard with his machine gun…

CW: There's a franchise for you.

SP: Over at Activision, we were trying to figure if we could put a name with it, a magazine or a person, and Tony seemed like the guy. We gave him the call; Neversoft cooked up a more *polished* demo, which had an actual skateboarder and two tricks. We called Tony in, and all the Activision suits assembled in the conference room… Tony just comes rolling in with his ripped cargo pants, sits down at the table and suit after suit gets up and whips out revenue charts and so on. Tony's just gotta sit there the whole time. At the end, we wheel in the Neversoft demo and, since Tony was a gamer growing up, he was totally into it. Then we didn't hear from him over a month. I think he was talking to some other companies.

JJ: Nintendo, for sure. The prospect was so sweet that I personally contemplated going to the bank, getting the money there and then and getting him to sign up to Neversoft, since we hadn't been bought by Activision back then. But I started thinking that might piss a lot of people off, so I left that ball in the Activision court.

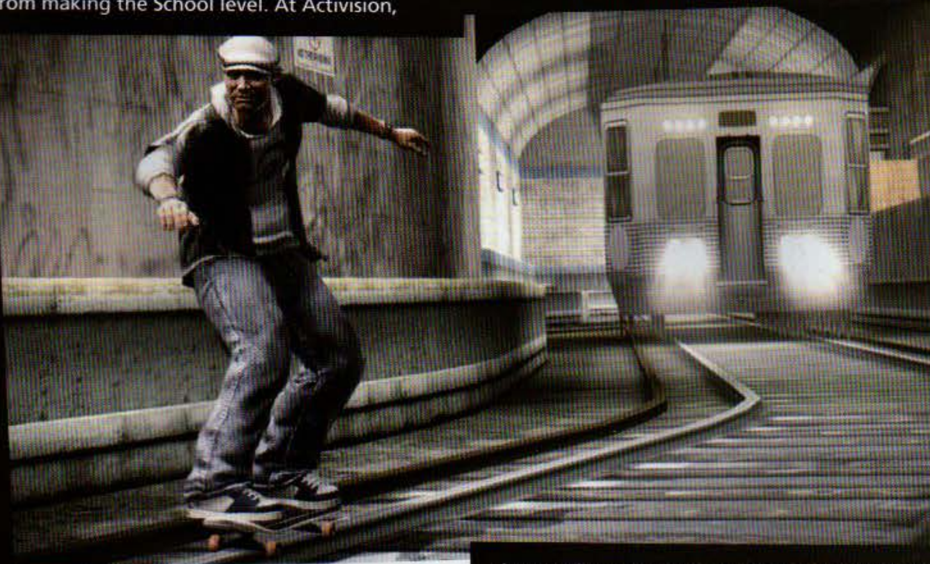
SP: Neversoft kept making the game without Tony, and eventually ended up faxing him the whole trick list and going: 'Look, we really need an expert to help us, [to] make it legit'. He was on board soon after, and it was like having the world's greatest expert on tap.

CW: He's always been advising and playing, throughout the entire series.

JJ: We had some of the biggest debates that year, to decide whether it should be point-to-point racing or downhill. And the speed bump we had to get over was how it would feel if the player can just *go*? It would complicate things, and our ideas required an overwhelming amount of animation… but finally, we're just like: 'Screw it, let the player go anywhere'. That was huge.

SP: That was a mental hurdle for a lot of people. Up until that point, it was mainly racing. People weren't used to it: 'You just do tricks? You just skate around? That's going to get old'. I'd say the best input we had came from making the School level. At Activision, we had to get some video-capture done, and the guys in the video room would just sit there and play that level all day. They'd come back into my office and be: 'Dude! Did you know you could do this, and go here and do that?' And so we got the vibe that it would be plenty of fun for people to do. And after that we made the demo for the Chicago warehouse level…

JJ: That's when it dawned on us that we might be on to something. We had friends over at other developers, like Naughty Dog, and we started to hear: 'Everyone over here's playing your demo, man, no one's getting any work done!' Oh, really? Then we'd start getting news of combo scores that were much higher than we thought would be achievable. And Tony himself totally busted out for us… while making that demo, making the best game we'd made yet, Tony steps up at the X-Games and throws down the successful nailing of the 900, which ends up as ESPN's Play of the Day for two weeks running. That was huge for us. The planets lined up that particular year.





Rigger-type characters can place custom cameras around the world, for fun or as a requirement for certain goals. Such manipulation doesn't stop there – custom props and object deformation can be applied to the entire gameworld

SP: The whole time we were making the game, we were thinking if we could sell 250,000 units, we'd make our money back, and maybe a little bit of profit… aside from that demo, there was nothing, the press wasn't interested, and there were no magazine covers.

JJ: I used to take versions of the game and a big stinking TV, load them up into my pick-up truck, and go to the skate park and let kids play it. I'd just park up, get out the folding table and my cooler full of beer, and I just hung out and let people play the videogame, do my own PR.

CW: We were doing *Spider-Man* at the same time, and we had this official costume, and Joel gets dressed up in it and went to the liquor store.

JJ: Let's see what happens when Spidey buys some whisky…

CW: We were filming it, Joel's drinking whisky, and Spidey's getting hammered on his 'day off', and goes to the liquor store, we walk in, and these guys are freaking out and thinking they were being robbed.





JJ: I had my mask on, and so they were getting their guns out and shit.
CW: There was a guy behind the counter, got his gun ready, in case Joel gets his out.
JJ: It was the mask, man, the mask and the video camera. We can't find the footage, but it is, y'know, mildly amusing...
CW: But, yeah, we were getting into two big franchises, and we had to let Spider-Man go, as that was the call.
JJ: We shipped *Spider-Man* and *THPS2* at the same time, and to get a game done for the following Christmas for release on the PS2, we had to take drastic measures, like put the whole company on it.
CW: Giving up *Spider-Man* was tough, though.
SP: We did get to put Spidey in the game. And we sent that costume to Tony, and had him skate; he actually got hurt because he couldn't see out of the suit.
JJ: The one I wore to the liqour store was one we rented, it was just shit. We thought: 'Woah, we can't let Tony wear this!' There was this actor guy, he had a licensed costume – 'Don't worry dude, we'll get it back to you!' The first thing Tony does is get the costume, can't see out of it, sits down and cuts the eyes out of it. It came back trashed, in a cardboard box.

With *Spider-Man* out of your hands, *Gun* seemingly not due to return and *Guitar Hero 3* now fresh in your care, do you think it's possible for you to continue two franchises in parallel?
JJ: The pillar for doing that is just going to be your management structure, training guys up to be able to troubleshoot and to make decisions. And I think we've made it past that. We grew into a much larger team to do *Gun* and *Tony Hawk* together. We had some growing pains there, but we're moving on now with both *Tony* and *Guitar Hero*, and we've got guys that can handle it.

"TONY STEPS UP AT THE X-GAMES AND THROWS DOWN THE SUCCESSFUL NAILING OF THE 900. THE PLANETS LINED UP FOR US THAT PARTICULAR YEAR"

Bright on *Tony Hawk's Project 8*'s promotional video, which was released at last year's E3: "It turned out great, but when we made it, hardly any of the game's art was ready, and so much of it was built just for the video, which slowed us down for a few weeks"

And do you have much of a staff turnover, what with Neversoft forever having to reach deeper and deeper into this one franchise, this one core videogame? Is there a significant burn rate?
JJ: Not really. There were times when we had zero turnover. But now that we're at 130 people, there's just attrition.
CW: And then there are natural factors, people wanting to move away and get married. It's rare that anyone actually goes off to another company.

HAMMER TIME

The 'Rigger'-type skater can call up a menu that allows them to sprinkle the entire gameworld with additional trick pieces of their choice, from U-rails to kicker ramps to quarter pipes, with adjacent pieces snapping together without any fuss. There's a limit to just how many components can be scattered across the environment, but those changes are in place until you further modify them – including when other players visit during online play. Further, a hammer tool allows for deformation rather than addition, turning lampposts into angled grind rails, say, or converting a heap of rumble into a short but convenient ramp.



SP: Having two projects is good for that. There's a five-year window on a franchise where you then definitely need a break, you need to do something else. *Gun* came out of that – we had so many talented people who just couldn't do another *Tony Hawk*, but we had another group of equally talented people who still loved the series and couldn't give it away.

JJ: But there's something to be said for getting too big. Even with 130 people, I can still get to know everybody's name, but there's a potential limit there and you don't really want to go beyond that, because it all begins to disconnect. A development team, to me, is a rock band that gets so big that you have to run it like a sports team.

What do you think about EA's *Skate*?

SP: We don't.

JJ: I'd rather be us, put it that way.

SP: We're so busy and so driven with our own product. We obviously pay attention to what's going on, but it doesn't pay to be reactive; we're more focused on pushing on with our own game, leveraging what we've done before.

CW: Here's a metaphor for you. Take the Chelsea and Manchester United situation – so long as Man U keeps on winning, who gives a crap about what Chelsea's doing?

JJ: In the time we've made these games, we've tried a *lot* of different things. And we've tried them over and over... and I would just say we've sifted through a lot of stuff, and we picked what we thought was the most fun.

CW: We've always tried to get that balance of honouring the sport, but realising it's also a videogame. That fine line is that we always aimed for.

Brian Bright: I can count seven or eight skateboarding games that have come and gone over the years, and there will be more.

CW: By the way, I have to apologise for the Man U reference, since I'm a Leeds United supporter. But it's against Chelsea, so it's OK...

And which of the *Tony Hawk* games has been the most stressful to produce?

CF: Depends on who you ask.

JJ: The most stressful ever, for me, wasn't *Tony Hawk*, it was a game called *Big Guns*. Burned $800,000 on that one before it got shit-canned way back.

SP: *THPS2*. It was the first create-a-skater mode we'd made, alongside a park editor. We were like: 'Oh my God, what have we done? It'll never be tested and shipped in time'. Classic videogame development.

JJ: It's a key contributor to your success, but it's the bane of development.

SP: I think we were too ahead of our time on *THPS3*, the first online PS2 game. We drew a line in the sand and said we'd do it, and Sony said: 'We'll be there for you', and then, uh, things didn't quite work out. But we'd already made our commitment, so we got it done. The same thing happened with *Tony Hawk's Underground*, with all of its user-created content – create your own goals and levels or put your face in the game, plus an online vault system for user-created content. It was flawed, in that we didn't really know what we were doing, but now such concepts are buzzwords. At the time, there was just no userbase for PS2 online. We were doing a lot of work to serve just this very small percentage of our audience.

"IN THE TIME WE'VE MADE THESE GAMES, WE'VE TRIED A *LOT* OF DIFFERENT THINGS. WE'VE SIFTED THROUGH A LOT OF STUFF AND PICKED THE MOST FUN"

SCORE TISSUE

Even though *Project 8* represented an arguable revitalisation for the series, and Neversoft may well, in its own eyes, be improving the series with each successive *Tony Hawk* title, review scores in recent years have pointed toward diminishing returns. The metacritic.com averages for the flagship formats show a solid 90 per cent or more enthusiasm for most of the games that appeared on the previous generation of consoles, but the past three titles have begun to dip in terms of critical reception. Does that feel fair? "I think there's some built in bias at this point, but I think the European magazine press did us justice with *Project 8*," says Bright. "Our customers don't necessarily buy every game," explains Pease. "You have game reviewers, though, who get this game every single year, and so their perception of what it is and how it stacks up is often quite different from how the public feel. We'll just continue to try and make the better game than we did last year; sometimes the scores follow on, sometimes they don't."

***Tony Hawk's Project 8* was a gratifying surprise, thanks to the 'Nail the Trick' addition, adding a layer of glitz and intimacy to a trick system that's long thrived on the slick interconnectivity of its ideas rather than anything more sensational. And it was introduced within the standard year-long gap...**

SP: Well, the space of just two months, actually.

BB: We had a few meetings about it half-way through development, and Scott was saying he wanted to do something where the sticks controlled your feet, and so we built this early prototype. It wasn't very good, but showed promise. 80 per cent of people on the team just wanted to cut it.

JJ: Well, it was so late in the game. At that point, you're just going to freaking kill yourself.

BB: It was a goal on the schedule, and it just got pushed back and back.

CW: The turning point on that was to let you Nail the Trick anywhere. One of our designers, one of the best *Tony Hawk* players here, he was just firing it off at any time, and we were like: 'Shit, let's put that in!'

SP: And then the test department goes: 'OH MY GOD, what have you done to us!?'

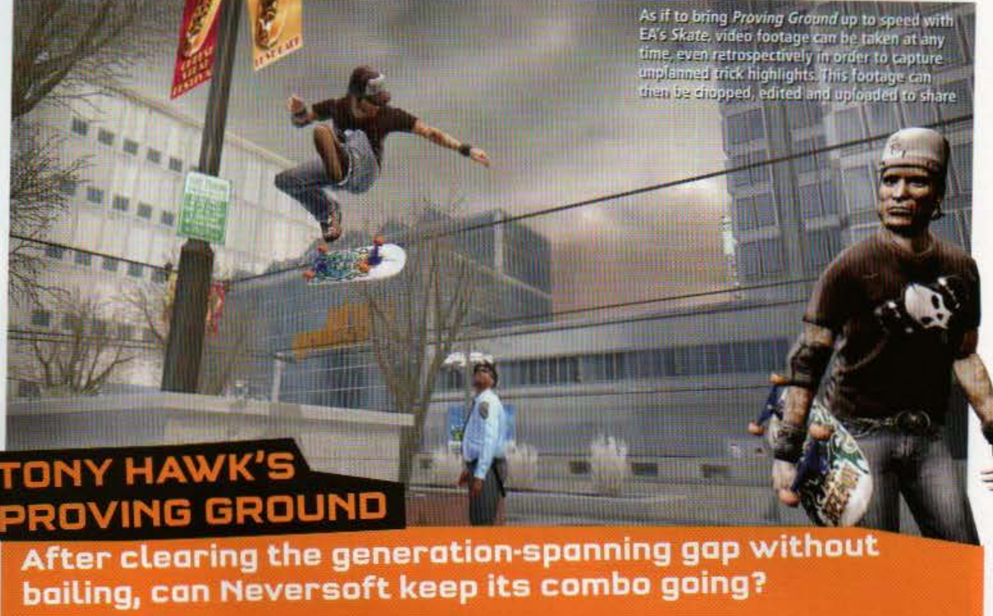
The *Tony Hawk* licence is yours until 2015. How do you intend to maintain it for the next eight years?

JJ: Heck, I dunno. I can't tell you what's going to be in next year's version of the game.

SP: We have so much knowledge of it. To hand it off to someone who doesn't have that... we know how complex all the elements at work are, and it's hard to envision how to let it go and still maintain the quality level. We couldn't take on *Madden*, say, and make it competitive, within a year.

JJ: Although, we're easily going to master this *Guitar Hero* thing...

The *Tony Hawk* games are an evolutionary cul-de-sac, one of the most iterative franchises currently in motion, outside of maybe KOEI's *Dynasty/Samurai Warriors* titles. "Another way to look at the franchise is that it's an ongoing game design experiment," as Pease puts it



As if to bring *Proving Ground* up to speed with EA's *Skate*, video footage can be taken at any time, even retrospectively in order to capture unplanned trick highlights. This footage can then be chopped, edited and uploaded to share

TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND

After clearing the generation-spanning gap without bailing, can Neversoft keep its combo going?

When a genre-dominating brand is about to be challenged – and, in this instance, by one of the biggest franchise/licence publishers in the business – it's difficult not to start making bets on the outcome. In the red corner, weighing in at over a dozen titles in less than a decade, is *Tony Hawk*. And in the blue, made from parts unknown, is EA's *Skate*. There are certainly comparisons to be drawn – each has replay editor for crafting footage to share with others, metallic-washed cityscapes, increasingly intimate trick systems and multiple career paths – but it swiftly begins to feel like an all-too-futile exercise in punditry, gloves or no gloves.

Proving Ground, despite the somewhat neutral sheen of its environments, is still all about exaggerated colour, intent on playing with skating rather than replicating grass-roots sensation. And while it's about to introduce more calculated additions than previous follow-ups have dared, they're still for the sake of further buffering that core of flowing, endlessly faceted combo creativity. Three separate, independent strands of progression are offered – based on the paths of the Rigger, Hardcore or Career character classes – that can be switched between as and when you wish.

Careerists are the aspiring professionals and sponsor-seekers, aiming to build a crowd-pleasing name for themselves through showboating precision. This is where the Nail the Trick feature – a zoomed, slow-mo perspective that focuses on your skater's feet and board – has been expanded to include Nail the Grab and Nail the Manual. As well as opening up a new high-score avenue for players not fond of machine-gunning their way through the pad-pounding barrage of traditional, realtime trick lines, it adds characteristic scope for fluid improv; board and body movements can now be switched between at many more moments during animation – grabbing the trucks, for example – and the spectacle no longer ends with your landing, thumping down into a manual with a thick thud, feet hooked into tricksy Casper positions, or the like.

Riggers are responsible for the create-a-park element being blended directly into the main game, more significantly than its piecemeal, peripheral role in *Project 8*. As a Rigger, the entire gameworld is now fodder to be tinkered with. A skill for clambering also allows them access to new areas, such as breaking into a museum to record a show with established pro-jester Bam Margera. Finally, the Hardcore types are out to push some limits, sometimes literally. They bring with them a 'Skate Check' move, which allows them to barge security guards and other authoritarian party-poopers out of the way, or up into the air with a typical ragdoll comedown. They can carve around the inside of bowl-shaped pools – in a manner similar to the Bert Slide that popped up meekly in *American Wasteland* – whose lips can be can be tricked with slash grinds, an angled variant of the standard grind. Most usefully and enticingly, Hardcore skaters can now build up impressive spurts of speed. Tapping a button in time with the skater's own foot-pushes allows you to accelerate significantly, enough to traverse enormous gaps without having to skitch vehicles or reverse engineer an arduous run-up.

Progressing through each of these categories also presents slight variations in terms of character appearance. Career skaters start to sport some branded bling, Hardcore develop scars and Riggers are kitted out with tools. Character creation options have been given a worthy revival, too, above the paltry possibilities available in *Project 8*. The most absorbing addition, however, comes in the form of your own hangout, a warehouse-sized space that's furnished with your own chosen themes, movie screens, decorative items and skate park equipment, a personalised mini-level which other players can visit during online sessions.

One of *Project 8*'s most gaping online omissions has also been plugged – 'Horse' makes a jubilant return, a game mode where the loser in a series of score battles earns the letters of a word (preferably a vivid insult, naturally) predetermined by one of the players. And it's fleshed-out like never before, allowing the host to select exactly which objects need to be involved in a single combo, or even mark out custom goals to be used for Horse's fine tradition of gleefully competitive abuse.

If it all sounds like undernourished overkill for a game whose predecessor is just six months old, then here's some relief: *Proving Ground* was begun while *Project 8* was just half complete, originated by part of the team responsible for the ill-fated but sparky western, *Gun*; and of course, there's no greater opportunity for success in *Hawk* games than linking your tricks.

FORMAT: 360, PS3, +TBC
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT
ORIGIN: US
RELEASE: TBC



Screen play

Ten years in, and machinima is still gaining momentum. So, just how far has it come, and where's it going?

It all started with John Romero's severed head – or rather, a gory block of 40 polygons representing it. The film in which it appeared, detailing the digital demise of id Software's (then) hairy head honcho, though somewhat unsophisticated, was in fact the inauspicious beginning of a genre of entertainment that now claims thousands upon thousands of shows as its own.

As the genre has swollen, it's also become increasingly difficult to define, variously intersecting with film, animation and puppetry. Its connection with videogames, however, has been fairly consistent during the 11 or so years since its inception. Back in 1996, a group of *Quake* players known as the United Rangers put together a short film, using the game's environment as a virtual sound-stage. This was no demo-reel or speed-run; the Rangers had a script to follow, and, acting as a cameraman, one player followed the action with movements and angles lifted from the conventions of cinema.

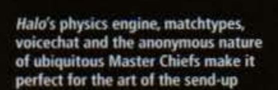
The drama, such as it was, didn't unfold in a manner greatly distant from events that might normally take place in a deathmatch: a team scouting out the level is decimated by a player camping on the other side of a teleport. Eventually, a well-placed rocket puts an end to their enemy's cowardly tactics, and the Rangers gather round the remaining gibs. "Yeah, it's John Romero," says one, delivering the line via text chat. "Figures," says another.

This film, entitled Diary of a Camper, is widely credited with being one of the very first examples of machinima. It is not alone in contention for that title. A group calling itself the ILL Clan, made up of film and television students, recognised the potential of their nightly deathmatches as a means of recording short films in an inexpensive way. From these Quake Movies, as they were called, the ILL Clan has moved on to become a production studio whose machinima creations have been commissioned by the likes of MTV and SpikeTV, and have recently been bought up by the Electronic Sheep Company in order to bring its popular Tra5h Ta1k show to *Second Life*.

The ILL clan aren't the only ones wringing financial success from machinima, and the fact that companies are willing to throw money at the community (albeit to exploit its potential for promotion) testifies to the increasing popularity of the genre.

"I think every machinima has an intrinsic marketing value," says **Burnie Burns** of prolific machinima studio Rooster Teeth Productions. "Any time a game ends up in front of an audience, it just shows off the technology. Even if you don't connect with the piece on a narrative level, you may still be impressed by the game used to create it."

There's a clear incentive for game developers to include tools for machinima creation within their games, and encourage their use. But, as Burns explains, the genre's success is a two-way street; using the game engines in this kind of creative way is inherently attractive to gamers: "People want to mould and shape their experience and tailor it to their own tastes. Machinima extends that interactivity beyond the set of rules the


Halo's physics engine, matchtypes, voicechat and the anonymous nature of ubiquitous Master Chiefs make it perfect for the art of the send-up



developers have given us. It introduces a new level of user contribution that will continue to draw new fans."

Of course, one other obvious reason for its success among would-be creatives is the low barrier for entry. "Machinima democratised the ability for anyone to make animation," says **Philip DeBevoise**, who runs the video aggregator and community site Machinima.com. "It's similar to how digital video cameras enabled a new generation of filmmakers and was the foundation for the user-generated content revolution."

It's possible for one person to be the cast, crew, director and editor of an entire movie and all it costs is the price of an old game and some dedication. With the source code for *Quake III* now released, and the free availability of editing resources, augmented and perfected in the years since the game's release, the barrier gets ever lower.

An advantage of purloining a game engine is that, if you're just going to be using the props and models the game already provides, many interactions will already be available at the press of a button – meaning that manipulation of a character becomes a matter of play – of puppetry rather than animation.

The accessibility of creative tools is part of a revolution, to use DeBevoise's term, which continues to run riot across all

Quake is often credited as being the game that birthed machinima, and its robust engine and tweakable visuals make it ideal. The cherry on the cake was the release of its earlier versions as shareware





digital media. Although based on beautiful and egalitarian notions, the proliferation of user-generated content unfortunately throws up one fundamental problem – 99 per cent of what is produced, whether it be for Wikipedia or YouTube, be it web 2.0 or game 3.0, is really pretty awful.

Machinima is certainly no exception to this. A quick perusal of the efforts posted at Machinima.com show many to be witless and clumsy. And this particular genre is handicapped more than most by the very accessibility that makes it so popular – because hand in hand with that comes the inherent restrictions on visual quality imposed by the game engine in which it is filmed. Even some of the best machinima, when placed in objective comparison with animation produced in professional packages, come across as poor imitations.

This is not to say there is no skill involved in putting together a good piece of machinima – just that those pieces are rare. Indeed, in order to be successful, machinimakers face a greater challenge than many auteurs in that their work needs to excel in other areas in order to mitigate the aesthetic limitations.

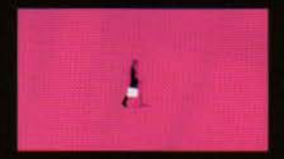
"We always need to get back to the foundation of story and writing," says DeBevoise. "It starts there. You could laugh at something because it was well written, irrespective of the game engine used or final technical execution.

"I think the quality of work is getting better by the day. Not only are the films more complex but the writing and general filmmaking has increased in quality. This will continue as more traditional filmmakers – writers, directors, and so on – use machinima to incubate new ideas and express their creativity."

This gradual advancement of the genre's sophistication is no doubt aided by the manner in which the tools have themselves developed, becoming saleable


Philip DeBevoise, the man behind Machinima.com. Although community sites are central, several of the more successful creators operate independent business websites



Clips from the Ballad of Black Mesa, an iPod-inspired feat of sound engineering and post-processing using the *Half-Life 2* engine. Think tribal rhythms using bullet and bomb sound effects, and you're there

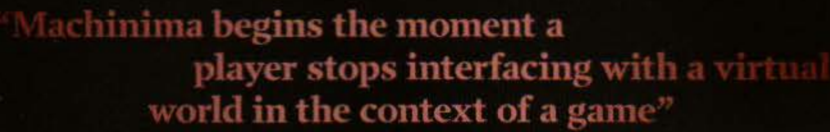




features of a game when once they were afterthoughts or hacks. *Halo 3* has much advertised its support for machinima, for example, and even the games without proprietary tools have been well-serviced by the machinima community's enthusiastic developers.

In fact, with the increasing convergence of games and tools, as seen with titles such as *Second Life* and *The Movies*, which enshrine content creation as part of their fundamental workings, perhaps machinima is progressively moving away from its original descriptors. If machinima was at one stage films created within a game, then we have to ask how much a game can become like a 3D animation package before machinima's association with games becomes irrelevant. Surely it would be more in the spirit of the original machinimakers to suggest that it requires a subversion of the game's mechanics – that the film is produced by a means other than that which is intended as part of the game.

"I think that machinima begins the moment a player stops interfacing with a virtual world in the context of a game," says Burns, when probed for a definition of the genre. "A videogame is simply an amazing piece of technology that displays a virtual space in realtime. The 'game' is the set of rules you are given to interact with that world. The moment you choose to stop interacting with that place by the rules – and to start exploring the world on your own terms – then the game has ended and machinima has begun."



"Machinima begins the moment a player stops interfacing with a virtual world in the context of a game"

It's perhaps because of the fact that most machinima takes place in game engines not specifically intended to produce films that the results lend themselves to satire. The most obvious example is Rooster Teeth Productions' phenomenally successful Red vs Blue – a sprawling comic drama taking place in the *Halo* and *Halo 2* engines, if not exactly in the *Halo* universe. Burns, however, disagrees with this assessment: "I think the focus on game-centric stories is simply a matter of circumstance. The people making machinima happen to be gamers, and as they write stories based on their experiences, naturally they will lean toward gaming. In Red vs Blue, we try to include as little gaming humour as possible. If our tone matches the tone of the game, it's simply because we are limited to the elements present in that virtual world. It's hard to make a romantic comedy when everyone is holding a rocket launcher."

Yet it's exactly that absurd juxtaposition in having the characters of Red vs Blue act in ways contrary to the game's ethos that makes it funny. They may avoid gaming humour in the script, but it all takes place within the context of one big joke at the game's expense.

It's arguably this satirical vein running through all of Rooster Teeth's productions which makes them so successful. Like the ILL Clan, Rooster Teeth has surpassed its amateur beginnings and now frequently finds itself commissioned to produce machinima that promotes the game in which it is filmed. PANIC, Rooster Teeth's machinima in the *FEAR* engine, sends up the game by presenting the squad of marines who deal with paranormal events as a group of chancers who've been exploiting their superiors' gullibility to get an easy meal ticket. Interestingly, Strangerhood, the promotional machinima Rooster Teeth made for the more prosaically set *Sims 2*, chooses to satirise the banality of American suburban living rather than the game itself – perhaps because the game is already partly parodic.

"*The Sims* is much broader in the sense that the suburban theme allows for more avenues of parody," says Burns. "A house, a couch, a television and a few people are the recipe for the modern American sitcom. *The Sims* has all of those elements."

Featuring characters referred to as 'assorted stereotypes' and an ongoing plotline that seems to change according to the demands of a particular episode, Strangerhood attacks many US commonplaces and the dull routines of everyday life. Its mauling of reality TV is not only memorable, but highlights the similarities between *The Sims* and the

Parodies of popular shows can rely on using the same instantly recognisable visual cues as their targets, albeit in slightly skewed versions – a technique that's worked in popular media from Spitting Image to Saturday Night Live



Tool tips

"The tools vary from game to game," says Burns. "PC-based games typically have more tools like a detached camera and the ability to modify game elements more easily."
The number and variety of tools is bewildering, but if you want to manipulate existing character models, without introducing new animations, then much can be achieved by recording your live play. In *Halo 2*, there are bugs you can exploit in order to get rid of any weapons you're holding, leaving your vision clear to act as a camera and meaning that no complex applications need to be used in order to follow the action or script behaviours.



It comes as something of a surprise to the protagonists of *FEAR* machinima PANICS to find some ghosts – they're used to spooked-out secretaries and an easy pay cheque





voyeuristic, sadistic quality of shows like Big Brother and The Apprentice. "Humans perform best," the TV intones, "in competitions where contestants have to live together in a house on an isolated island and lose weight by eating disgusting food and perform stunts in an effort to win the approval of an egotistic billionaire, all while fulfilling their dream of finding true love."

Perhaps one of the most thought-provoking machinima in this satirical vein is This Spartan Life, a talkshow taking place in *Halo 2*. Like the other machinima mentioned here, This Spartan Life draws much of its humour from the fact that it is filmed in a game – although not directly sending up the *Halo* universe, the frequently high-minded discussions are conducted with knowing absurdity: in an early episode, artist Peggy Ahwesh was invited on to talk about the place of the female within the cultural imaginary while bouncing along in a Warthog. A few caustic observations were made about the suggestively labial shape of *Halo 2*'s teleports. More recently, a debate on the subject of civil liberties was brought into relief by the use of weapons to underscore each side's argument. Certainly, This Spartan Life would be an above-average chatshow regardless of its setting, but its presence within the *Halo* universe undercuts everything with a surrealism that can't be dismissed in any assessment of the show's value.

Conversely, machinima that doesn't embrace the absurdity of its setting or even acknowledge the fact that it has been created in a game faces a struggle to surpass its often rather ropey visual execution. Machinima in which the game itself is not integral to the film's purpose runs the risk of looking like a lazy shortcut; the fact that its creators found it cheaper or easier to master the tools of machinima rather than an animation suite shouldn't matter in objective judgements upon its quality.

Notable exceptions do arise, however, such as the feature-length Borg War, which, once you brace yourself for the intense implosion of nerdiness that comes from combining Star Trek, fan fiction and videogames, reveals itself to be a well-plotted and engaging story on par with its Hollywood counterparts. Its creator, **Geoffrey James**, set out to create a film that was superior to the recent (and widely derided) cinematic offering, Star Trek: Nemesis. Even given the limitations of machinima, he almost certainly succeeds. In this light, it's easy to forget its clunking visuals, or at least forgive them, knowing that such a production would have been impossible without plundering various Star Trek-licensed games for their 3D and audio assets.

It's perhaps a measure of the increasing cachet of the genre that Shadows of the Dead, a machinima based on the *Half-Life 2* engine, is not yet close to release but has a trailer. And, the awfully dramatic voiceover aside, it looks like being a very accomplished production

A debate on the subject of civil liberties was brought into relief by the use of weapons to underscore each side's argument









"I wanted to re-use the sound clips from the two [*Elite Force*] games so that the voice-acting would sound professional," says James on his site. "Writing the script required more or less memorising the contents of several thousand voice-clip files and then rearranging them – or segments of them – into an entirely new plot. In some cases I was able to use the clips verbatim, but in other cases I did a fair amount of audio editing." The process allowed some of the original cast, including Patrick Stewart and Tim Russ, to reprise their roles, and imparts to the voice-acting a calibre that is often absent from machinima.

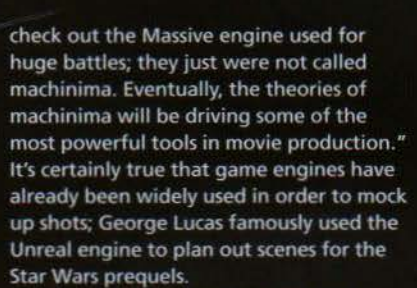
Lara Craft

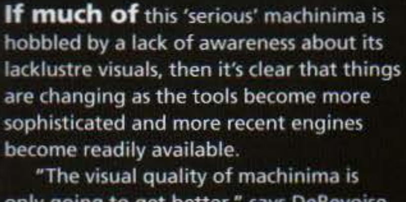
Machinima has been subject to more abstract uses than drama and comedy. Several artists have recognised its potential as an avenue for cultural criticism; commentary on film or less interactive media is often necessarily external – with games, and through machinima, an opportunity is provided for the artist or critic to get within the subject of their criticism. Peggy Ahwesh's film, She Puppet, gained notoriety in 2001 for examining cultural perceptions of feminism through the original *Tomb Raider*. In the words of the Electronic Arts Intermix, She Puppet 'transforms the videogame into a reflection on identity and mortality... of the individual in an increasingly artificial world'.



Oddly, the limited items and interactions in the original *Sims*, as compared to its sequels and *The Movies*, seems to have inspired better machinima – although given the form is created by limitation perhaps it should be no surprise







If much of this 'serious' machinima is hobbled by a lack of awareness about its lacklustre visuals, then it's clear that things are changing as the tools become more sophisticated and more recent engines become readily available.

"The visual quality of machinima is only going to get better," says DeBevoise of the future of machinima. "It's growing rapidly within the gaming community and I think it will soon cross over when we're able to create content that appeals to both gaming and non-gaming communities. A great model for us is how Pixar and Dreamworks Animation have created animated movies that appeal to dual audiences – adults and children."

It's apt to talk of such companies, since, inversely, machinima may well be a great model for professional animation studios – its quite easy to conceive of a company like Pixar one day building realtime, physics-enabled worlds in order to puppet their digital creations, rather than painstakingly animate them. As Burns points out, "machinima concepts have already been used in huge blockbuster movies like The Lord Of The Rings series – check out the Massive engine used for huge battles; they just were not called machinima. Eventually, the theories of machinima will be driving some of the most powerful tools in movie production." It's certainly true that game engines have already been widely used in order to mock up shots; George Lucas famously used the Unreal engine to plan out scenes for the Star Wars prequels.

Yet while Burns predicts that "the spectrum of machinima will continue to expand into other traditional filmmaking, both live action and animation," at what point this would cease to be machinima he is less definitive. Indeed, questions over the genre's future come back to the problem of how far removed from games it can go before it dissolves into the swell of other digital media. It's an issue that portends a split in the genre between users who seek simply to make animations, and those who seek to make animations that specify in some way the world of videogames. As animation packages adopt the essentials of machinimation, live-action puppetry et al, the value of producing animation in a game engine will diminish for this former group.

However, even if the term becomes so dilute as to be meaningless, there will always be machinima in its original, narrowly defined form, because there will always be those who wish to comment upon and satirise videogaming – and there will never be any better way to do that than from within the game itself.





The Ill Clan's Tra5h Ta1k is hosted by Ill Will (above, with William Shatner) and his companion Mel, a trash-talking rocket. The dialogue is consistently good, from the gaming in-jokes to a recent episode's *Second Life* tribute song



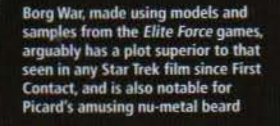








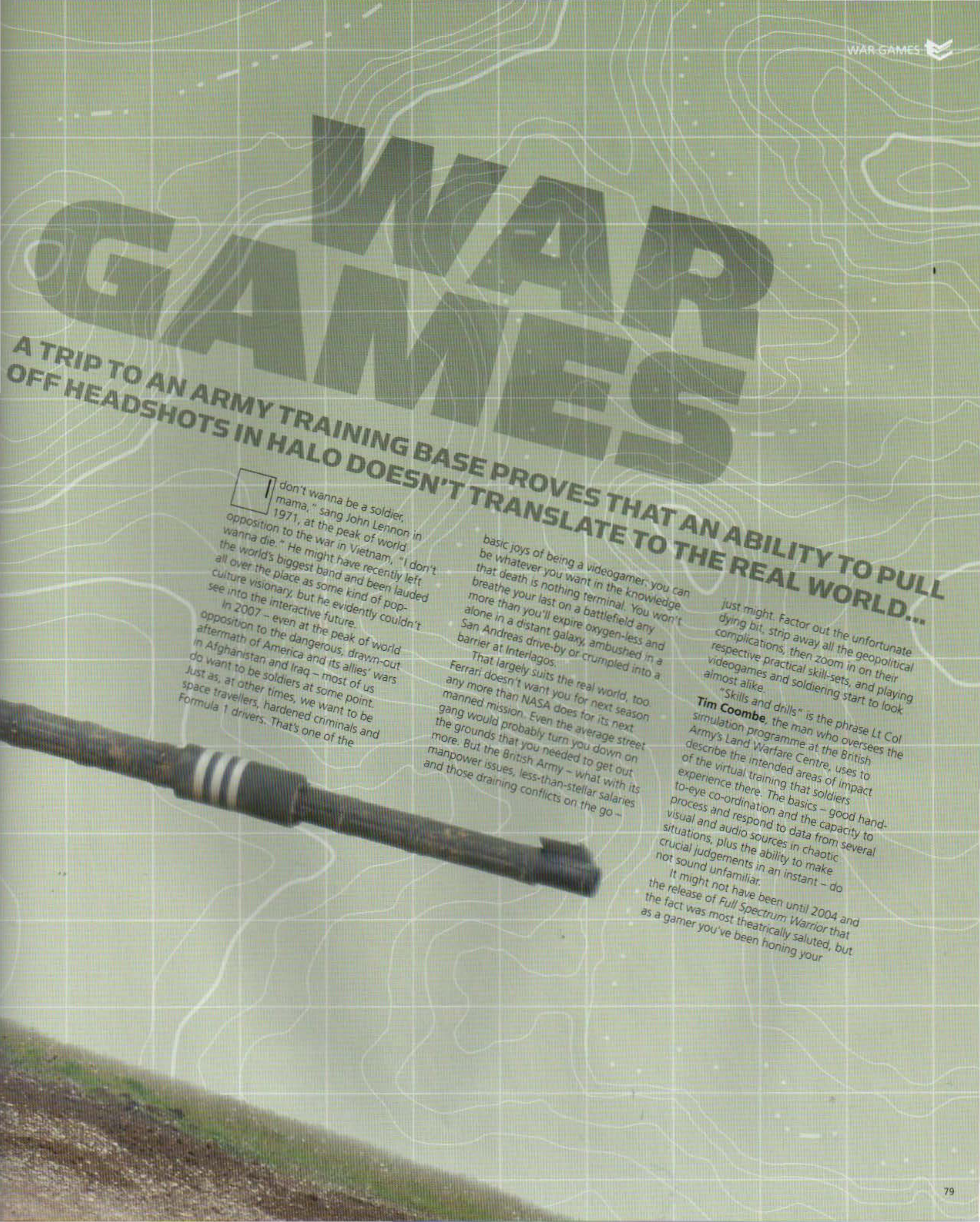




Borg War, made using models and samples from the *Elite Force* games, arguably has a plot superior to that seen in any Star Trek film since First Contact, and is also notable for Picard's amusing nu-metal beard



Photography: Andrew Linnett



WAR GAMES

A TRIP TO AN ARMY TRAINING BASE PROVES THAT AN ABILITY TO PULL OFF HEADSHOTS IN HALO DOESN'T TRANSLATE TO THE REAL WORLD...

"I don't wanna be a soldier, mama," sang John Lennon in 1971, at the peak of world opposition to the war in Vietnam, "I don't wanna die." He might have recently left the world's biggest band and been lauded all over the place as some kind of pop-culture visionary, but he evidently couldn't see into the interactive future.

In 2007 – even at the peak of world opposition to the dangerous, drawn-out aftermath of America and its allies' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – most of us do want to be soldiers at some point. Just as, at other times, we want to be space travellers, hardened criminals and Formula 1 drivers. That's one of the basic joys of being a videogamer: you can be whatever you want in the knowledge that death is nothing terminal. You won't breathe your last on a battlefield any more than you'll expire oxygen-less and alone in a distant galaxy, ambushed in a San Andreas drive-by or crumpled into a barrier at Interlagos.

That largely suits the real world, too. Ferrari doesn't want you for next season any more than NASA does for its next manned mission. Even the average street gang would probably turn you down on the grounds that you needed to get out more. But the British Army – what with its manpower issues, less-than-stellar salaries and those draining conflicts on the go – just might. Factor out the unfortunate dying bit, strip away all the geopolitical complications, then zoom in on their respective practical skill-sets, and playing videogames and soldiering start to look almost alike.

"Skills and drills" is the phrase Lt Col **Tim Coombe**, the man who oversees the simulation programme at the British Army's Land Warfare Centre, uses to describe the intended areas of impact of the virtual training that soldiers experience there. The basics – good hand-to-eye co-ordination and the capacity to process and respond to data from several visual and audio sources in chaotic situations, plus the ability to make crucial judgements in an instant – do not sound unfamiliar.

It might not have been until 2004 and the release of *Full Spectrum Warrior* that the fact was most theatrically saluted, but as a gamer you've been honing your



The weapons may feel something like real (top), but FMV setups such as these feel primitive. It doesn't make a non-soldier's success rate any better, though

battle skills every time you've held a controller – even if you've somehow never enjoyed a war game (a category from which, regardless of the predominance of violet over khaki, it would be absurd to exclude Halo).

Even at the grand conceptual level, as industries and cultural entities, the armed forces and the videogame business have a good deal in common: an overwhelming dominance by men and traditional male values, an inextricable connection to and fetishism of new technological developments, and a devotion to appealing acronyms and other important-sounding varieties of jargon.

The British Army is not oblivious to either fact, which is why the first group of journalists invited to try out its training technologies at Warminster hail not from broadsheet newspapers or military magazines, but from a selection of videogame monthlies.

The exercise is partly about explaining expenditure – like any taxpayer-funded organisation, the Army always wants more money than it gets, and needs to jostle for its share of the public purse. War simulations, Coombes explains as he introduces the facility through a sequence of bullet-points and diagrams on a projector screen, enable soldiers to learn skills and strategies that they once had to acquire on much more costly, risky and time-consuming field exercises with real equipment on nearby Salisbury Plain; they enable a familiarity that helps minimise subsequent errors with live ammunition; and they allow the army to experiment with fighting the kinds of conflicts that haven't happened yet.

But it's more particularly about recruitment – the external PR agency the Ministry of Defence collaborated with on the event assists solely in that area. It's an opportunity to discover that army training is about gadgets and exciting visual displays, not just strange bonding rituals and 40-kilometre jogs over hill ranges with rucksacks full of bricks. Coombes doesn't once call the systems we are about to see 'games', nor fudge the fact that all Army training is not for fun or career advancement, but for war. Nevertheless, once we proceed to the simulation areas themselves, the spectre of shooting stuff just for the sheer hell of it is never too far away.

Our first exercise takes place on an indoor shooting range called the Dismounted Close Combat Trainer (DCCT), one of 155 such units spread around British Army bases from Gibraltar to Brunei. Five army-issue rifles, converted so that they no longer fire live ammunition but attached to tubes of gas so that they still jolt on firing as they would with real bullets, are lined up opposite a wall-sized screen. Other weapons can be attached to each post instead, and when they are the technology simulates the specific properties of, and related protocols for, each one. The screen and software can either host video footage of scenarios acted out with real people from a single camera angle, or display CGI footage of terrain and opponents over which the overseeing officer has much more control.

The scenarios we experience are set in a dusty, Iraqi-style village, at a checkpoint and then at a boisterous protest by angry locals in a small, walled sandstone corridor. We're drilled on not shooting too early and that a Middle-Eastern man may just wield a gun as a status symbol – until it's pointing at you, you shouldn't assume it's a threat. Looking through the rifle scope makes each scene more abstracted; the village looks less like a series of buildings inhabited by humans and more like a series of possible targets.

The sensitive controls of contemporary tanks recall game inputs, but on a much more complex scale

The shift in magnification turns a town with citizens going about their ordinary days, à la Zelda, to a new Silent Scope level. It's a sudden trade between the big picture and the awareness that goes with that, to a close-up view that can highlight threats but also suggest danger where none exists. The military acknowledges the problem of this narrow focus in complex social situations. "We try to encourage soldiers to have a 'both eyes open' approach," the overseeing officer explains. We try to use our non-scoping eyes too, instead of squinting through them, but it's bloody difficult.

So is actually hitting anything. Nothing reacts in the FMV sequences; there are no impact effects or trees of events; a scenario simply unfolds the same way it was filmed, the same way it always does, with each shot represented in realtime by a momentary green marking accompanied by the number of the rifle from which it was fired. Hits are measured afterwards. Two sets of four gaming 'experts' score precisely zero. In more than one sense, it's a relief to hear we're on to computer-generated visuals next.

Mark Mears is the jovial PR spokesman for a company called FATS Inc that is based in the US and provides the central processing system and accompaniments for DCCT, as well as software solutions to a host of armies around the world. He unveils them after a comfortingly familiar and protracted Windows XP boot-up. It's not 'playable code' – journalists just get to see, rather than shoot at, some of what it can do – but the showcase soon becomes uncannily like previewing a PC game. Mears presents a polygonal soldier in a lush green environment. We see his eyes move left and right, following the camera, and hear that, unlike his FMV brethren, he's 'real'; he would die if he were

accurately hit with virtual ammunition. Mears explains how the instructor can move the camera freely, attach it to vehicles, move it through walls. He talks excitedly of future graphical updates that include real physics for the grass, realistically deformable buildings, and air support. Audio-wise, they're working on more realistic background noises: crying kids, barking dogs and so forth. Most exciting of all, certainly to him, is the arrival of software simulating a new, video-targeted anti-tank weapon called the Javelin.

Even the analytical tools, Mears explains afterwards, are uncannily reminiscent of shooter stat-porn. We are frequently reminded that the technology is solely for 'analysis': only real people of an appropriate rank are able to use it for 'assessment', and there are all manner of breakdowns of shots and hits, a racing-line style superimposition of the ideal movement of the gun during the action of firing, and the familiar option to turn off the rumble – sorry, recoil – to help those recruits who aren't such hot shots. How could we not enjoy the spectacle? "Boys' toys," Mears chuckles to a soldier standing outside afterwards.

"WE DON'T RESET THE EXERCISE IF THE GENERAL DOES SOMETHING WRONG; HE HAS TO WORK HIS WAY OUT OF IT"

Next, in a nearby lecture theatre, Lt Col **Nick Bailey**, who runs the Combined Arms Tactical Training (CATT) unit, the unavoidable parallels continue to echo everywhere. The sludgy polygonal desert we observe on the screen represents the administrative end of a system through which a general can practice 'battlespace management' of infantry and air and land vehicles as driven, shot in and commanded by real soldiers in a vast hangar around the corner. One of its key objectives, Bailey explains, is to generate the same kind of immersion in those involved that he sees in his 14-year-old son in the zone with *Age Of Empires*. It's a dead ringer for *Advance Wars*, minus any evidence of art direction. "I like to test the limits of my sandbox," he smiles after a glimpse of one of its three environment options. There is one important difference, though. "We operate on Murphy's Law here," Bailey adds. "We don't reset the exercise if the general does something wrong; he has to work his way out of it."

The next phase of the CATT experience takes place inside one of those 200 vehicle simulators (some of which are button-perfect replicas of the interiors of specific models of real military vehicles, while others are designed to stand in for a variety of different machines). All sit within bland, functional metal boxes are lined up in rows in the hangar. We wriggle into a beige box and are confronted with a complete simulated interior of a Warrior armoured vehicle, with every steering implement, two screens, scores of buttons and switches and, in place of a window, four letterbox-shaped screens through which the gunner can get a simulated 360° view.

Then we embark on a group action that begins on some green hills as part of a joint pursuit of an enemy tank, and ends in a town where medical vehicles need cover and snipers are secreted on a rooftop. But there are other obstacles to be negotiated first – the system experiences several false starts before we kick into action, and even our experienced, full-time tank driver spends three minutes reversing and resetting before he can think about assisting with any offensive.

Controlling a tank used to be a matter of wrestling with hulking machinery, our on-board real-life commander explains later, but now – in a sop to the improved dexterity of the 'Nintendo generation' – the steering and buttons are touch-sensitive. But, cramped inside and bowed in the gunner's seat – in an unwieldy, wired-up helmet with competing and half-audible miked voices and interference in each ear, as the whole unit chugs and wheezes and frustrates even its experienced driver, while trying to remember button combinations that would get laughed out of town by any sane playtester – the system seems an obstinate reminder of how compromised even the most advanced military 'realism' games can offer really is.

Once again, we largely mangle our missions. As with the rifle range, it's an experience that at once echoes and thwarts the experiences of the videogame player. The grammar of controlling is entirely familiar, but the dynamics of playing are not. Risk is everywhere, but reward is nowhere: no league tables, no special badges for sharpshooters, no elaborate death animations, no eye-candy, no new powers, no load screens or 'level complete' messages. At the rifle range, one journalist had said he'd like to have one of the gun units installed in his living room, then complained to a soldier that

SPECS AND VIOLENCE

Dismounted Close Combat Trainer (DCCT)

The DCCT is essentially a firing practice system for foot soldiers made by US-based corporation FATS Inc, which creates 'virtual training solutions' not only for various armies of the world, but also for a range of civil careers in which people have to learn protocols for interacting with the public. A theoretical maximum of eight soldiers can be lined up in lanes against the screen, with their given exercise controlled and edited by the officer supervising them from the instructor console, which connects to the central computer which runs the FMV or processes the CGI for the chosen exercise, and runs off a 2.8Ghz Pentium IV (not all of its components are off-the-shelf stuff, but even the bespoke hardware is designed to conform to commercial PC standards). Each weapon is fitted with an IR laser device that measures shooting accuracy, and the instructor can assign other characteristics to them – a tendency to jam, for example. That accuracy is assessed after an exercise by the IR shot matrix being superimposed on the exercise matrix, which enables not only the final hit but also the movement of the weapon that led to it to be traced. "You have to watch how you use the information," the FATS spokesman says, "because you can damage somebody's confidence if you're not careful. It's so precise it can make a really good shot look bad."



he couldn't let rip with rain of automatic fire. He couldn't, she had replied, because the point of the exercise was to learn when not to shoot. Utterly familiar, then, but also unwieldy, uncomfortable, bound by legal and procedural constraints and unwilling to provide the usual hits of gratification: that's how these virtual exercises feel compared to videogames.

Twenty-one-year-old Private **Pete Wilson**, who is based at Warminster, has plenty of experience of both. He's a committed gamer with an Xbox 360 and a squadron of fans of everything from *Rainbow Six* to *FIFA* in his quarters. And he, too, can't help comparing it to the real thing. He's laden with examples of job and hobby affecting each other.

"I play games a lot slower. If myself – a five-year soldier – and a civvie were to play a game, the way I'd play it would be a hundred times different. I'd be much more tactical. I'll be looking around when Joe Bloggs might go in all guns blazing and die. My mate was having a play fight with me and he actually lost. And he got angry with himself, and I say: 'I'm a soldier, right, and if that was me now [in your situation] fighting an enemy soldier, I'd be dead.'"

"MY JOB HELPS ME PLAY GAMES, AND BELIEVE IT OR NOT, PLAYING GAMES HELPS ME IN MY JOB AS AN INFANTRY SOLDIER"

It's especially good training for those tiresome game chores of checking ammo and fuel gauges. "Before [The Army] go in and a assault a position, we put a fresh mag on, so we can do a burst. Now when I'm playing a game, if I've got to go in a room and clear it, the first thing I do is look in my magazine. It's good to be able to do that in a game instead of bang-bang, Hollywood-style. It's good that they're becoming so realistic that you do have to think about it. And my job helps me play games, and believe it or not, playing games helps me in my job as an infantry soldier," says Wilson.

He's played plenty of games based on real, or at least real-esque, Clancy-style confrontations, but the game he hails as most accurate is *Gears Of War*. Wilson's unconcerned that its enemies are not of this Earth. The detail and feel of weapon-handling in the game, the emphasis on finding cover and the chance for haste to lead to jammed weapons, more than make up for its thematic flights of fantasy.

Wilson didn't buy the game as homework, however; he was won over by the Mad World TV ads and the accompanying visuals. Which raised one other unavoidable question: as a current-gen console-owner well-schooled in high-sheen shooters, did he ever find himself distracted in army training by the sheer, belligerent blandness of the CGI environments and effects. "In the CATT, yeah," he responds. "The graphics aren't good, but what's the point of wasting money on the graphics? It's the physical training element you can get from it. Why make it pretty if it can be ugly and still do the job?"

The word 'videogame' has surely been used more and more discussion and reporting of the current conflict in Iraq – whether the testimonies of soldiers, the comments of journalists, or the arguments of peace protesters – than in any before it. In a chapter on virtual warfare from his book Second Lives, **Edge** columnist Tim Guest quotes a US soldier who, on his return from Iraq, says: "I have seen innocent people being killed... you totally take the human out of it and make them into a videogame."

If war has become a videogame, does that mean the military's to blame? Do we mean its increasing dependence on technology has abstracted soldiers from the real world they're fighting in and the prospective victims there? And if so, how is a stealth-bomber pilot shooting on an auto-targeting computer any less engaged than an American crewman ready to drop a cheerfully named atomic bomb on a whole Japanese city, or a submarine commander about to torpedo a distant hull?

The gameplaying soldiers at Warminster don't get indignant about games that purloin the trappings of real wars for entertainment software – they sometimes enjoy them too, and their bombast and lack of verisimilitude is taken for granted, just as it is in movies.

Some war-playing gamers are more prone to agonising, but however many shots they fire in a war game, or any game, nobody actually gets hurt. Sure, playing gung-ho gamers online who really seem to think they're fighting for the US Army and tagging ragheads for God and country might inspire angst about the psychological effect of war games on real-world minds – but watching trigger-happy gamers' frustration at the delays and discomforts of real army training systems only serves as a reminder of all the differences that endure, and always will, between leisure and military training software.

If games are art, then they should be able to do anything art can. The same is true if they're simply entertainment. From Homer's Iliad through the pulp sagas of The Eagle and Sgt Rock, to rap videos, fictions have always exploited the trappings and dangers of warfare to tell compelling stories. Games have been doing it for decades too. Though the audiovisual detail in modern games bears little relation to the stripped-down pixel icons of old, there's no clear philosophical reason why *Call Of Duty* should offend anyone who wasn't bothered by *Dogfight*, or repel any gamer who was happy to play a contemporary illegal anti-government guerrilla in *Contra*. (Or, before that, anybody who's ever enjoyed invading nations in Risk, tooling up an Action Man or playing with regimental lead miniatures.)

There's even a case for contending that virtual slaughter helps keep the peace in the real world – that it's a safe outlet for biological impulses that have no place in the developed world. In his 2003 book The Essential Difference – which argues that, despite the best efforts of forward-thinking equality campaigners, men and women generally think and function in fundamentally distinct ways – the Cambridge psychologist Simon Baron








Cohen (yes, he's his cousin) reports that, in primitive societies, one in three male deaths comes as a result of disputes over status. Killer instinct, you might call it, or the urge to become elite. If you can appease your outdated instincts by destroying an army without leaving the house, you can still drop the kids off at school in the morning. Maybe it's only fair for the military to look to videogame players as potential manpower – without the option of letting off anti-social steam in front of a screen, perhaps more of them would have signed up years ago.

Furthermore, videogames are just a tiny – and unusually candid – example of the interrelation of technologies from civil society with military ones. Singling them out for moral scrutiny rather misses the point that even the most pacifistic geek is, right now, benefiting from the spoils of wars past. Not just at the aesthetic level – because his imagination is branded with the beauty of the modified World War II weapons that were used as part of the look of Star Wars – but also at a practical one. Not for nothing did radicals in the 1960s obsessively refer to the 'military-industrial complex'.

In the introductory PowerPoint presentation at Warminster, the first graphic on the screen after the military insignia was the Saab logo. Humvees and Jeeps only became consumer vehicles after years of dedicated military service, just as computer companies, mobile phone firms and countless other R&D-dependent brands wouldn't exist without the patronage of the military down the decades. Austrian crystal company Swarovski is generally known for its jewellery and celebrity-stuffed annual charity event Fashion Rocks, but it still makes much of its revenue from optical equipment for the military. You don't even need to look beyond its own website to learn that such equipment became 'the company's saviour during the war.' (That's World War II, of course, which broke out a year after the Nazis had formally incorporated Austria into the Third Reich).

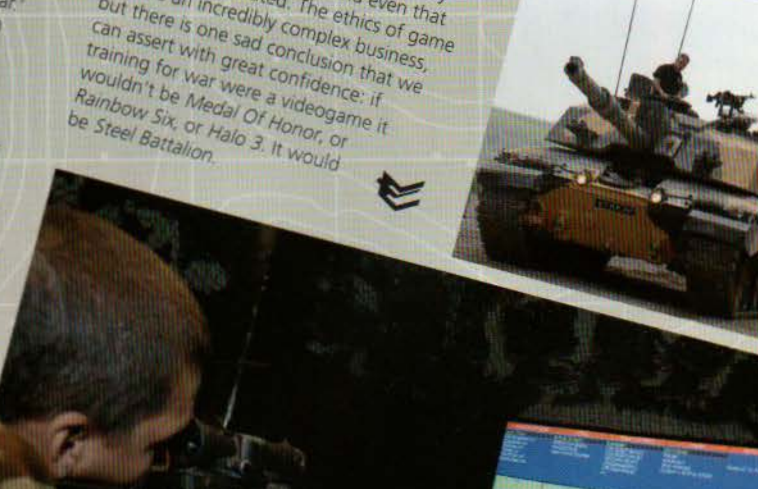
War gains are everywhere. And war simulations overlap everywhere with war games. But they're also a world apart. You're reminded of that by the unease those shooting-range video scenes instantly create. By the way everyone makes bittersweet jokes about the popularity of virtual deserts to train in, and the way soldiers wince when a costly lesson from Iraq operations comes up in conversation. Regardless of the weather effects they can turn on, the accidents they can factor in and their utterly accurate dashboards, there's no way to simulate the feel of real land underneath your tank, or the sensation of patrolling on a sweltering Baghdad afternoon in thick, encumbering body armour. "It's like the F1 drivers who play games," a WOW-addicted private had said at Warminster. "You can learn the track but you can't learn what it feels like to drive on the track."

In 2005, in the wake of the bizarre tale of an unsuccessful former employee's lawsuit against the creators of *Full Spectrum Warrior*, the New York Times sought out real military men who weren't too keen on the army-issue original. One lieutenant colonel, who tested *Full Spectrum Warrior* at the infantry school at Fort Benning, said: "It's a neat game, but I'm not seeing where I can train with it." After 'playing' the British Army's equivalents, it's not too difficult to guess what he's getting at, and it is tough to see how that title's thirdperson view could possibly impart even the basic skills that hands-on, firstperson training or long-view battlespace management sims could. *FSW* was largely compelling because you knew it was 'real'. Return to the game after wrestling with clunky rifles and stubborn tanks, and even that sense has evaporated. The ethics of game war are an incredibly complex business, but there is one sad conclusion that we can assert with great confidence: if training for war were a videogame it wouldn't be *Medal Of Honor*, or *Rainbow Six*, or *Halo 3*. It would be *Steel Battalion*.

WHEELY MILD SHOW

Combined Arms Tactical Trainer (CATT)

The Army claims that the £400 million Combined Arms Tactical Trainer system is the most advanced of its kind, outstripping in scale and ambition even US equivalents. It's a digital control system for simulation exercises and allows gunners and drivers to sit in accurate cockpits and respond to orders and changing circumstances directed from a commanding officer. It was a costly investment, but it is also now used by forces from other nations, and its running costs boil down to a few hundred pounds' worth of electricity per day. It's also networked so, in addition to allowing simulated conflicts on three terrain databases – which are based on southern England, northern Europe and the Mojave desert, with the latter being the understandably most used one these days – officers and ground troops can partake in realtime exercises inside specific vehicle simulators over a network. Warminster connects to bases with comparable setups in the UK, Orlando and Sennelager, Germany. After some initial issues with self-locking equipment and stutters in the operating software, we finally embarked on a tank mission that involves sitting in the gunner's seat of a simulator as the driver follows a colleague across plains and downs in pursuit of an enemy tank, then patrolling a town where there are reports of snipers. The commander has an independent sight and the ability to sync the gunner's sights on to his own. These features, like shooting and zooming, are controlled with a series of triggers, buttons and directional pads on the admittedly N64-like steering controller. Even under instruction from a commander who's been through the scenario more times than he can count, we don't find them, and the exercise ends in confusion and, at least for our part, outright failure.



Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Forza 2



Having auctioned for 10,000 credits a Golf GTi with flames up the sides and 'It's Chico time' written on the back, our creativity has finally reaped financial reward
360, MICROSOFT

God Of War 2



As Homer said: "Men grow tired of sleep, love, singing and dancing sooner than war." And so say all of us, especially when it involves the fun of severing kraken tentacles
PS2, SCEE

Vespers

We've faced starvation, insanity and damnation delving deeper into Jason Devlin's nightmarish text adventure vision of a plague-ridden medieval monastery
PC, MA

Old rope
Are re-releases fair game?



Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition. Ninja Gaiden Sigma. Flatout: Ultimate Carnage. Three games released this month, one for each of the new generation of consoles. Three games that are remakes of games made for the previous generation of consoles

Ninja Gaiden developer Tecmo calls its strategy 'remastering', a cunning term that brings to mind the lofty process of cleaning up a scratchy old music recording to make it new again – lending a chance to hear something as it was intended to sound. And, in many ways, Tecmo has applied this to *Sigma*. It's now in 1080p, character models are more defined, some extra modes and levels have been added, environments have been rejigged with a little more detail, and it throws around more fancy graphical effects.

But, much as this might sound like *Sigma* is in line with Tecmo's policy of having its games push at the technical limits of today's platforms (see our interview on page 18), in reality it's hard to see it as much more than a buffing up of the original Xbox versions' excellent art design. Distant trees are clearly still made up of a minimal number of polygons, clothes still have a flat sheen to their surfaces, and rooms have the bareness that's so characteristic of the last generation of consoles.

The Wii version of *Resident Evil 4* hasn't even been granted a face-lift. Instead, Capcom has simply inserted a new control scheme into a re-release of the PS2 version, with GameCube graphics. At least *Sigma* offers a new playable character and some new stages.

It's easy to feel ripped off if you've already played and loved these games in their original forms. It's easy to expect that a re-release on a new platform equates to something bigger, brighter and better, kinks ironed out and expansive new content added.

But it's also easy to see that these games are pure to their originals' principles. *Ninja Gaiden* and *Resident Evil 4* were great games the first time round, and these new versions are, too.

Could adding a suite of new features and polishing it all up to current-day standards make a game false to what made it good in the first place? Don't new audiences – the Wii owners who never had a console before, the PS3 owners who never touched an Xbox – deserve a chance to play these games in something approaching their original forms?

Should we see these games not as cynical ways of making money from old rope, but as noble celebrations of some of the best games of recent years?

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



THE DARKNESS

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: STARBREEZE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168, E174







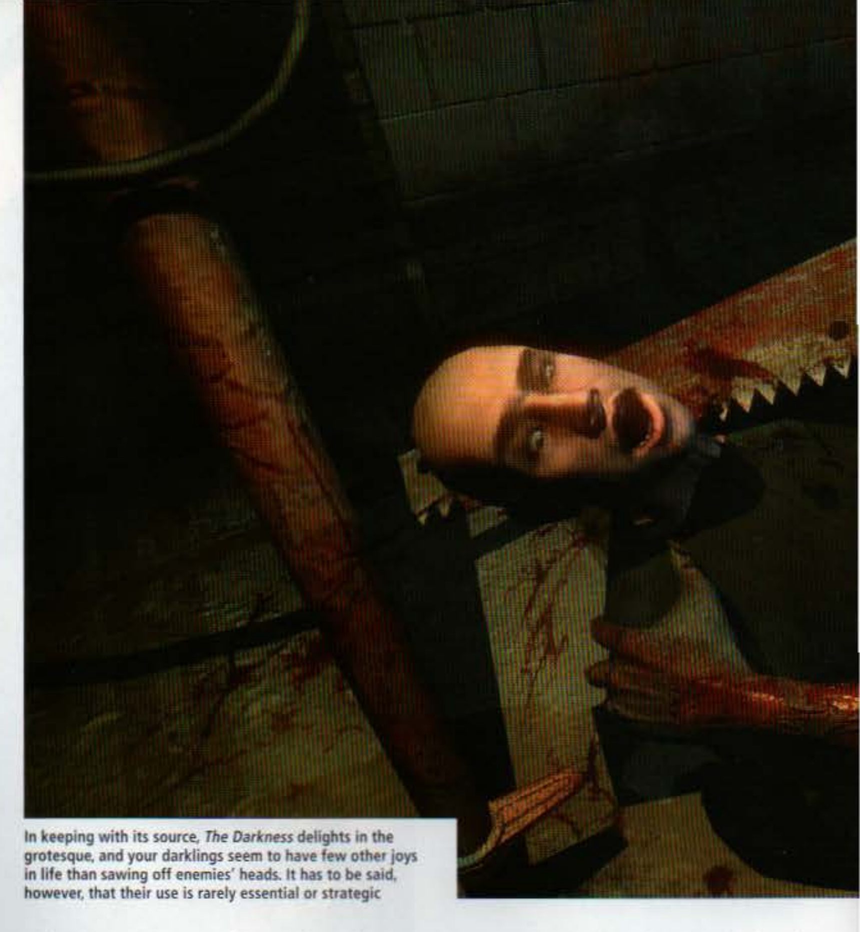
The environments are grittily detailed and rise above their otherwise accurate representations of everyday locations by virtue of the sheer level of detail therein. From the vandalised interiors of subway trains to the clinical coolness of meat fridges, everything has character

Busting heads makes Jackie Estacado feel good. Scratch that – busting heads makes what's inside Jackie Estacado feel good. Estacado is a skilled and proficient mafia hitman, but his real talent goes a little deeper, right down into the darkness. Based on the comic book of the same name, *The Darkness* puts you in Jackie Estacado's shoes from the day of his 21st birthday, which is also the day some powerful supernatural forces first manifest themselves from within. Handy.

Estacado's powers are the stuff that designers dream of, and range from small snakelike arms that will merrily chomp the faces of his enemies and sneak through gutters to open doors, to creating a vortex that will instantly suck all enemies in a space into itself. Visceral is an over-used term, but here it's the only fitting description. The combat is visceral and physically robust: jets of blood spew out of your opponents, stealth kills bring a wince as bodies are ripped into by multiple shots, and hitting a body in the right place at the right moment will send the corpse cartwheeling backwards. The game makes appropriate use of Estacado's talent for dual-wielding pistols, allowing for some wish-fulfilling close-up kills on unsuspecting enemies, though of course other weapons such as a shotgun and dual submachine guns are also available. Although health recharges, enemies are crack shots on the higher difficulty settings and will quickly take down Estacado if he's exposed – combat often involves inching towards a position, picking off the odd foe, before unleashing your Darkness powers on a group. In general the engine is flawless and the execution of the moves is easy, although in certain situations a specific power such as moving a tentacle over a wall or through grates can be fiddly.



Combat is visceral and robust: jets of blood spew out of your opponents; stealth kills bring a wince as bodies are ripped into by multiple shots



In keeping with its source, *The Darkness* delights in the grotesque, and your darklings seem to have few other joys in life than sawing off enemies' heads. It has to be said, however, that their use is rarely essential or strategic

The scripting and voice acting is uniformly excellent, from the bums in subway stations to the many mafia wiseguys Estacado will come up against. It needs to be, because *The Darkness* is a story-driven game, and many of your objectives will come from phone calls (you can use any phone you come across in the game) and face-to-face meetings. From the opening of the game, where you're in a car talking to two friends, which eventually ends up as a chase scene, to sections where you'll meet up with other characters only to watch the news on television, *The Darkness* has some exquisite touches that put it head and shoulders above many other games – though occasionally you're smacked in the



The Darkness abilities are sometimes so effective that you'll almost feel sorry for your mafia foes as they get torn into oblivion. Almost. And there're always the excellent dual pistols, of any type, to finish the job





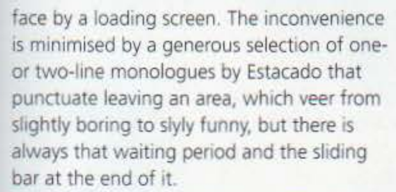








If you can't stomach blood in large quantities, it's best to steer clear of *The Darkness*. It could be accused of gratuitous gore, but it's all done with such panache and even humour that it succeeds in becoming more digestible. Still, not one for the kids (or Jack Thompson)



face by a loading screen. The inconvenience is minimised by a generous selection of one- or two-line monologues by Estacado that punctuate leaving an area, which veer from slightly boring to slyly funny, but there is always that waiting period and the sliding bar at the end of it.

After the loading, the environments are grimy, cluttered and perfectly realised. The subway station is messy, there's graffiti on the walls, certain phone boxes have their receivers ripped off, and the ceiling is flaking. Outside, neon signs flicker and rubbish bags and cardboard boxes pile up at street corners. There are some inconsistent elements in the world, however, and it's much more linear than it first appears. Linearity isn't a such big deal, but the inclusion of (for example) padlocks that prove amazingly invulnerable to shotguns when, in a different location, others pop off with a harsh word, is simply illogical design.

Loading screens and minor inconsistencies are, in a sense, nitpicking, but *The Darkness* brings it on itself by succeeding so well in creating an environment. From offering multiple paths through a conversation to the surprisingly aggressive actions of your enemies during many of the game's fine set-pieces, *The Darkness* stands out for not only having real character, but having rounded characters. There are moments that bounce, but there are moments that soar: choosing to tell Estacado's girlfriend that he's a contract killer brings about an excellent tragi-comic moment, as does making him open his heart about his feelings.



There is one obvious comparison between Darkness powers and Riddick's ability to see in the dark, and *The Darkness* certainly owes a debt of inspiration to Riddick, but it's put the intervening years to very interesting use

And to return to the meat, hearts are something you'll be seeing a lot of, as they're gorily and merrily munched in front of you by the Darkness tentacles (see 'Please release me'). Having the equivalent of a one-man army on your back, ready to pop out at a moment's notice, is one of the better FPS gimmicks in recent times, and when your full complement of abilities is available you experience an awesome sense of power – manifesting itself with lots of gore – and few enemies will be able to stand in your way.

Despite some minor annoyances, very few recent console FPS experiences have been designed so robustly, and little touches, such as switching television channels in mob hideouts to phoning the main antagonist and listening to him rant at you, give the world of *The Darkness* an authenticity and wholeness that is rare indeed. Fans of the series are in the position of seeing a game that is an enhancement, rather than an exploitation, of its source material – and fans of the FPS have another good example of the genre to add to their busy schedules. There's the odd trundling moment, but this is a great example of how licences should work. **[7]**



Watching the rules of reality get a little bent is nothing unusual for Jackie Estacado, and the extended combat sections are rarely short of a twist or a set-piece to break up the usual lines of pinstriped goons and cops

Please release me



There are various Darkness powers to unlock as you progress through the game, and you can upgrade your powers by devouring the hearts of your downed enemies. This results in one of a number of animations that rarely get tired, as your right Darkness arm chomps down on some cardiac goodness and occasionally shares a bit with your left, and with every 20 or so hearts a further level of power is unlocked.

Extra abilities, in contrast, tend to be unlocked by context. The second type of minion, the gunner, is obtained in a train tunnel – where, upon spawning, it will stand in the middle of the tracks and pepper an oncoming train with bullets. Enough to stop it for you to get past, but only after the minion itself has been crushed under the wheels. Quite tragic. Still, there's plenty more where that came from.



SHADOWRUN

FORMAT: 360, PC PRICE: £40 (360), £30 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: FASA STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E164





The races are easily distinguishable, and each of the essence and tech abilities has a distinctive visual signature. The urge to shout 'boo!' as you teleport next to a foe hasn't disappeared yet

What did we do before deathmatches? What filled the hole: boardgames? Hopscotch? A few pints and a fight down the local? Those dark days aside, the demand for more and varied ways to frag each other has never been greater, such that one of Microsoft's biggest summer releases is a cross-platform FPS with no singleplayer mode and a daunting level of complexity.

Shadowrun is loosely based on the cyberpunk RPG of the same name, and concentrates on the series' dichotomy between mega-corporations and citizens trying to avoid their influence – inasmuch as there are two teams in each match, RNA Global and the Lineage. In practice, one team wears blue uniforms and the other wears red and there are no other differences to speak of. Although it omits *Shadowrun*'s orks and all of the subspecies, there are four playable and distinct races: human, troll, dwarf and elf. The differences are as might be expected: humans are balanced; trolls are lumbering powerhouses; elves are quick and agile with low health (although they can regenerate it); and dwarves are great magic users. There is a possible imbalance with the dwarves, which might remind some players



It's punishingly detailed and only constant play and becoming familiar with every aspect of it will reward the player



The trolls are big and mean, and will invariably win any head-on battle. This specimen is toting a minigun, which would cause any other race to slow down while carrying it – the troll has no such limitations



Shadowrun's graphics are in one sense quite outdated, but in a practical sense they operate very effectively. The clear demarcations between teams and the various locations within an area make navigation and responses almost automatic

of either Oddjob or monkeys, in that they are small, tough, have a great deal of essence, can absorb essence from magical attacks and can survive a headshot. The attempted counterbalance – that their essence regenerates slowly – doesn't seem like much of a penalty. This makes a capable team of them a nightmare to play against, and the shortest of the races might become the automatic choice between players simply to ensure a level playing field.

And that level playing field between console and PC is a key aim of the game: PC players may imagine that mouse control will allow any number of quick-fire headshots on clumsy pad users. But the advantage of precision shooting has been negated by the simple mechanic of the reticule enlarging when moving. That is, if your character is running forward, or jumping, or spinning on the spot, then the reticule increases in size. This makes continual headshots on the go impossible, and necessitates a more entrenched approach to combat: establishing a 'safe zone' with your team before a co-ordinated assault on your opponents. Attempts at a commando-style yee-hah assault will invariably leave you dead and surrounded by the opposing team, regardless of skill level, and too far away from your comrades to be resurrected.

If that makes *Shadowrun* sound like a combat simulator rather than an action FPS, then in a sense it is. The emphasis is on focused teamplay, assisted by an intuitive and well-implemented message system that can be more useful than voice chat simply through its regulation of terminology – each level is broken up into many sections with names that show up unobtrusively onscreen. While initially overwhelming, it means that players quickly learn their way around the



locations, and teams can be directed with sometimes awesome efficiency thanks to the quick messages always containing your location. It's an innovation that's simple and yet aids navigation a great deal – future games in the genre should take heed.

But the combat in *Shadowrun* stands or falls on its combination of magic and technology – or, in its game nomenclature, essence and tech. Each character has a set number of essence ampules, which are dependent on race, that dictate their ability to cast magic, and the use of tech will affect this total. Essence includes the ability to teleport, to create a 'tree of life' that heals characters under its branches, to turn your body into an incorporeal smoke form, to use a 'force push' equivalent called Gust, and to resurrect your allies.

Tech tends to be much more about enhancing traditional FPS elements:







The gliders look undeniably cool (left) but have to be made use of sparingly and quickly, lest you become an 8bit duck in front of a Nintendo Zapper. Summoning your own lethal fido (below) has a similar visual appeal; the ability to unleash them on specific opponents is a delight



Shadowrun's environments betray a lack of imagination, and there's little of the gloriously idiosyncratic world of its inspiration. Fans after a taste of the world would be much better served to hunt down the SNES action-RPG





heightened reflexes, enhanced eyesight such that you can see through walls, a targeting assistant, gliders to navigate great drops or distances, and even anti-magic generators. Although one or two pieces of tech are extremely useful, competent magic users seem to have the upper hand – and though upgrades do play off against each other at times (for example, using Gust on an enemy that is using Smoke will severely damage them) you can have only three pieces of tech or magic equipped at once. The selection method is simply too clumsy to allow an effective interchanging arsenal, and most players will select three favourite upgrades and keep them equipped for the majority of the fast-paced matches.

Shadowrun breaks up these matches with a carbon copy of *Counter-Strike*'s purchasing system. At the beginning of every round of every match, you have a short window in which to buy weapons, essence and tech for your character. If you've died in the previous round your starting weapon will be a pistol, and there are no weapons on the maps, so buying at least an SMG is essential. Magic and tech last for the duration of the match, and while this does mean that each team has to be self-regulating, it is heavily weighted towards the better players. More kills and friendly assists will mean more money, and so the better team is, by the third or fourth round, much more tooled-up than their opponents. The idea of rewarding better players in such a concrete and immediate way isn't novel, but given the general standard of online play (high), it will be as frustrating as ever for the more casual console player.

That latter point is *Shadowrun* in a nutshell. This isn't a game for the odd blast every now and then: it's punishingly detailed and only constant play and becoming familiar with every aspect of the complex abilities system and the intricate levels will reward the player. *Shadowrun* has too many cooks: it's a heady broth initially, and the possibilities might seem unmatched, but ultimately it turns out to be limited fun. **[6]**

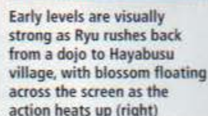
I am the resurrection



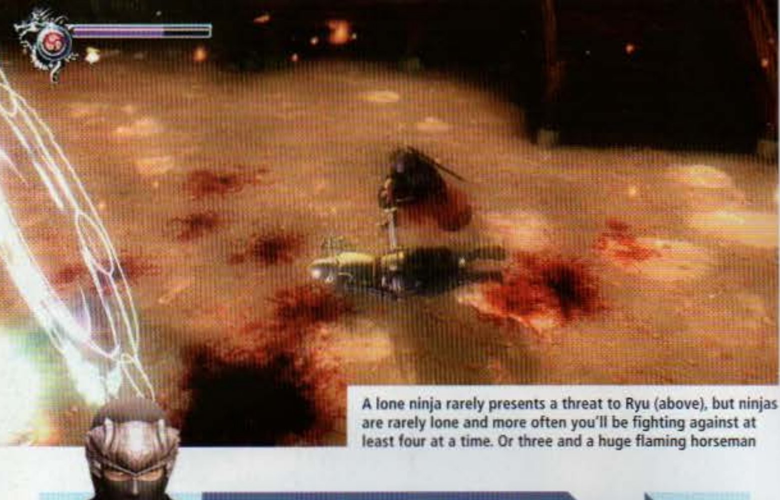
The resurrection mechanic is one of the most interesting aspects of *Shadowrun*'s emphasis on co-operation. If your character dies, it can be revived by a teammate – but only if they've bought the Resurrection essence, meaning that teams have to discipline themselves against blowing all the cash on rocket launchers.

You can only be resurrected once (on being killed a second time, your body disintegrates) and your survival is essential to your resurrector staying alive. If they die, then your character will begin to 'bleed out' at a fast rate, and the only way to survive is to stand under a tree of life and request a further resurrection from breathing teammates. It can make you a sitting duck, and force hasty backtracking – all enforcing *Shadowrun*'s key message of 'look out for your teammates'.





Early levels are visually strong as Ryu rushes back from a dojo to Hayabusu village, with blossom floating across the screen as the action heats up (right)



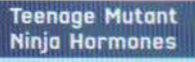


A lone ninja rarely presents a threat to Ryu (above), but ninjas are rarely lone and more often you'll be fighting against at least four at a time. Or three and a huge flaming horseman

Being a ninja is little to do with peaceful contemplation, and everything to do with flipping away and backwards from your clumsy foes on one hand in a burning building

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: JULY 6
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: TECMO



Teenage Mutant Ninja Hormones



One of Sigma's vaunted upgrades is the opportunity to play as Rachel, but it's not the bonus it might seem. She may have her own weapons and upgrades, but Rachel is significantly slower than Ryu and the emphasis is on battering enemies rather than skilfully outmanoeuvring them. Quite apart from Tecmo's questionable take on the female form, the reason anyone buys a game with 'ninja' in the title is simply that they want to play as a ninja. Replacing Ryu for several levels with what's essentially a blonde Xena with a big hammer detracts from the main game (particularly as environments are re-used), and, it could be argued, ruins some of the purity that made the originals so compulsive.

The first thing to say about *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* is that it's a remake of the Xbox game *Ninja Gaiden Black*, which itself was a remake of *Ninja Gaiden* (2004). Normally, this would be something to criticise, but when *Ninja Gaiden* got it so right the first time and the remainder of the field has stood still, it's a welcome update before the inevitable *Ninja Gaiden 2*.

Ninja Gaiden stands alone because of its combat system. It's as excellent as ever, and if anything even more fine-tuned than the complex original. Compared to the average 3D action game, the unforgiving and tight attack/block/counter dynamic still seems as fresh as it did three years ago. The simple reason is that it's impossible to repeat tactics or pause for thought during fights, and the oft-repeated maxim that 'it's all about the block button' doesn't explain what the game forces the player to do. Standing still and blocking won't stop you taking damage: enemies have moves that will easily bypass your guard. Holding block and moving won't stop you taking damage: enemies will quickly surround you and begin an onslaught that's almost impossible to stop. Running around and jumping won't help, either: enemies will easily slam you down. The secret is not in the block button, or any single action that Ryu can perform. The secret to *Ninja Gaiden*'s combat is in fluidity and swift interchange. You can't just stand still, or just run, or just move cautiously, but a combination of all three interspersed with some brutal offence will quickly down swathes of enemies – and there's no shortage of them.

It does seem odd, therefore, to find the mix of puzzles and free-roaming in the stages. The genius of the game is in the combat system, and finding missing parts of a statue to unlock a key does nothing but detract from this core. The levels themselves are not inspired pieces of design, demanding little more than a perfunctory trawl through for signposted items, and it's difficult to see why anything more than a relatively linear progression was needed.

The update to current-generation hardware means a huge leap in graphical accomplishment, and several moments of *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* are breathtakingly beautiful: a fight through a burning village (that was only in FMV in the Xbox incarnations) is particularly memorable. The spectacles of the boss battles are also helped by this graphical pizzazz, and several bosses that were only available on Master Ninja difficulty in *Black* can be fought in the normal difficulty setting of this version.

Ninja Gaiden is still as good as it ever was, and the visual improvements can't be faulted. The minor redesign of some of the levels is generally irrelevant next to the meat of the game, however, and not worth the update in itself, though the retuned Challenge mode will still have hair being torn out – in a good way. But the biggest problem *Ninja Gaiden Sigma* has is that, although it's undoubtedly the definitive version of the game, anyone hankering after ninja action has probably already as good as played it. And anyone who hasn't might consider dusting off the Xbox and hunting down *Ninja Gaiden Black* on the cheap instead. **[8]**





Ryu can acquire several weapons such as nunchuks and double swords (above) – but unfortunately they're not as convincingly implemented as the basic dragon sword



FLATOUT: ULTIMATE CARNAGE

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EMPIRE INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E176

First things first: *Ultimate Carnage* is little more than a remake of last year's *FlatOut 2*, which itself was little more than a remake of the first *FlatOut*. It again brings a few new tweaks to the series, mostly to take advantage of today's processing grunt. The number of fellow racers is now 11, there is even more trackside detritus to send flying, and car models and environments are more detailed. But it's largely the same game, even if the visual effect of smashing through a trackside picnic area with the pack of other cars careering, colliding and shattering all around you is amplified much further than in its predecessor.

Ultimate Carnage's main innovation is its Carnage mode, a series of events that takes much better advantage of *FlatOut*'s core appeal – the pleasure of destruction – than its hokey *Gran Turismo*-style Career mode. The race events here are not about finishing position but causing as much devastation as possible in a limited time, scoring points for damaging and destroying other cars and the environment in general, and getting big air. With nitrous supplies constantly refilling, the result is an enjoyable balance of careless smashing and calculated collision.

Carnage mode races lay bare the uncomfortable tension that exists in *FlatOut*'s standard races between the need to come first and its destruction USP. In Career mode races it awards smashing up stuff with money and nitrous, but such aggressive, exuberant driving rarely leads to taking pole position. Attempting to earn nitrous boosts often costs more time than it compensates, because you'll need to go off the racing line and risk shunting a speed-sapping pile of tyres or an object that turns out to be totally immovable.



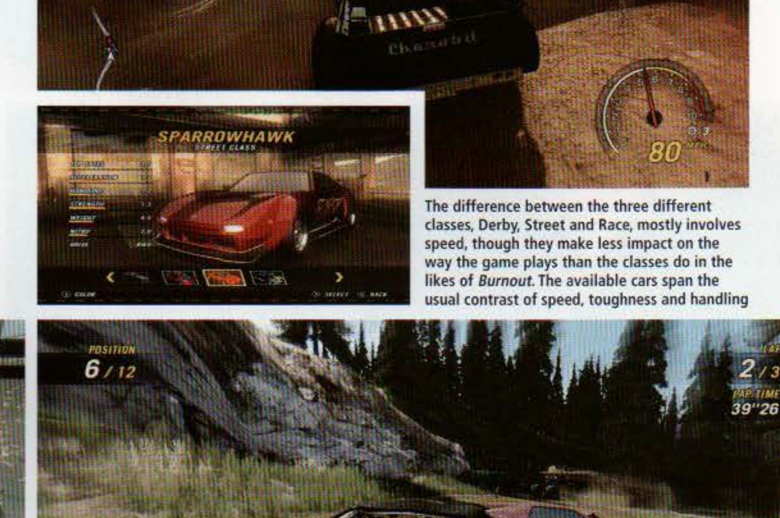
The tension is so palpable because *FlatOut* isn't quite the rough-and-tumble arcade racer it thinks it is. At heart, it's an accomplished physics simulation, robust enough to generate all sorts of chaotic yet plausible emergent events.

Correspondingly, car handling is on the realistic side – steering control will desert you when you're going over a hump before a wide curve, and your car will be sent into a catastrophic tumble if you take a jump without squarely lining up and landing. With 11 other cars haphazardly crowding around you, races can feel uncompromising and frustratingly random: it's annoyingly common for a leading car's autonomous crash to send you flying on the last corner.

Mercifully, *Ultimate Carnage* has an instant-restart option, and you'll use it time and time again. It also has a lenient reset feature, which will put you back on course with a rolling start pretty much as soon as you go off-track, a feature that can be really easy to exploit.

Outside of Career and Carnage, *FlatOut* has a fairly comprehensive set of multiplayer options, from Xbox Live to party games based on its Stunt mode (see 'Body trouble'), but little more than *FlatOut 2* offered, and each event includes Live leaderboards.

Indeed, as a whole, *Ultimate Carnage* is a generous package that can be highly entertaining. But it's a pity that it fails to apply a comprehensive design overhaul to *FlatOut*'s robust engine. **[7]**



The difference between the three different classes, Derby, Street and Race, mostly involves speed, though they make less impact on the way the game plays than the classes do in the likes of *Burnout*. The available cars span the usual contrast of speed, toughness and handling

The rough-and-tumble of being in mid-position in a race is just where you do not want to be. It's generally easy to retain first place, but if you don't get there early on it's more than likely you never will. Slamming and being slammed is undeniably fun, however, as is the satisfaction of totalling an opponent's ride



Ultimate Carnage **is a visually appealing game, featuring detailed, characterful environments (though a mall in one track is strangely cavernous and contains bizarrely enormous shopping trolleys). Lighting, shadowing and smoke are also well done. Car models deform spectacularly and it all clips along at a constant rate, even with the screen filled with cars**



Body trouble



Once again, the Stunt mode returns, applying ragdoll driver-launching to a disparate selection of stunt modes that probably stretch its dubious charm a little too far. From the High Jump to the Ring of Fire, Royal Flush to Ten-Pin Bowling, there are more than enough of them to exploit the dynamic, which is a simple matter of setting the launch angle and applying aftertouch. Ragdoll drivers are featured in the main game, too. They're especially visible in the Derby mode, in which they remain on the arena floor until the end of the round, a three-game-old joke that's beginning to feel a bit tired.

Though the Overlord himself is undeniably powerful, he's best used as a last-ditch backup when the minions are taking a beating: situations such as the village require little more than a cursory wave of the hand before the destruction begins





Sheep are scattered throughout the world, and they provide an easy and plentiful source of lifeforce for your underlings, who will gleefully ride them before delivering a coup de grace



OVERLORD

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £50 (360), £30 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: CODEMASTERS
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E177

Overlord puts you in the black and knobbly suit of armour of a very bad man, head of an army of minions and ready to bring terror to the world. Or, at least, that's the idea. *Overlord* is a very modern game in the sense that you're evil, sure, but also kind of… conflicted about it.

There's no doubt about the intentions: dark towers, hapless peasants and destructive spells suggest an oncoming reign of terror. Problem is that it's not a good world you're up against. The game is so successful in presenting a tainted fantasy world, with fat halflings, weepy elves and corrupted unicorns, that you can't help but be a saviour in the majority of situations, and the main enemies are so perverted and weird that the Overlord is a much more palatable alternative. It's a good joke, but it's a joke that's only funny once – after a certain point you want nothing more than to raise hell, burn things and forget about looking for an elven statue, but that opportunity rarely presents itself and you'll have to wade through zombies or dwarves instead.

Fortunately, rather than the Overlord himself, the game's special quality is in the crowds of minions, and it takes one or two deaths before you realise that, powerful as the Overlord is, you're much better served by standing him at the back and sending them into the fighting. There's a sense of genuine power at walking through an environment, waving your hand and watching the minions sweep around the place smashing everything in sight – and bringing you the spoils. But, occasionally, the environment is so detailed that there's just too much for them to do and as you frantically point at an onrushing foe they'll start smashing up a barrel instead.

This is one of many niggly flaws in *Overlord*. The most incomprehensible is the absence of a map. In a game composed of world hubs and mazy locations it's incredible that this feature hasn't been included, as it's next to impossible to navigate forests or caves without getting confused. Added to this, the minions sometimes have dubious pathfinding abilities that mean they'll get stuck behind you, meaning either an exit from the level or wasted time trying to find them. The nonlinear environment means that, in the early stages, you'll sometimes spend hours trying to complete an objective that can't be finished until other sections are. And though the general graphical charm almost makes it an irrelevance, there's no hiding the extremely poor draw distances.

The preview of *Overlord* in **E**177 called it the spiritual successor to *Pikmin*: like that game it's a great idea but a flawed execution, and will need a sequel to achieve its potential. Yet while it could undoubtedly do with a bit more polish, any game that encourages you to roast halflings "like suckling pigs" has something to it that's quite redeemable. **[7]**

Following the leader, wherever he may go

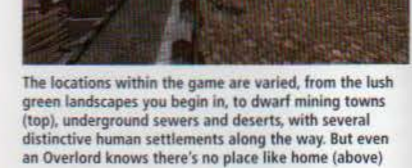


The minions are the real beauty of *Overlord*, and come in four flavours: brown for fighting; red for distance attacks and fire; blue for negotiating water, fighting spirits and reviving dead minions; and green for poisonous environments and assassinating enemies. They will merrily walk into the jaws of death, and it's impossible for your black heart not to melt when they run up, eyes gleaming, gangly arms held up and out with an offering "for the master". The minion master and minion jester are key members of an occasionally inspired supporting cast, with the voicework on the former worthy of particular praise: "Ooh, she's a tasty treat, sire."





The interior of your dark tower. You can spend your money on upgrades and make it more grand and foreboding – but they're purely cosmetic improvements



The locations within the game are varied, from the lush green landscapes you begin in, to dwarf mining towns (top), underground sewers and deserts, with several distinctive human settlements along the way. But even an Overlord knows there's no place like home (above)



CALL OF JUAREZ

FORMAT: 360, PC PRICE: £35 (360), £20 (PC) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT (360), ASCARON (PC) DEVELOPER: TECHLAND

Individualism, death and redemption – the western's themes should lend themselves well to the firstperson shooter. And yet it has been surprisingly under-represented, its most recent exemplars offering little more than a passionless checklist of the western's clichés. *Call Of Juarez* is no less familiar with the formula, and it is beleaguered by any number of flaws besides – but its recreation of the old west is populated by uncommonly well-drawn characters whose interactions are evocative of the genre's more powerful themes.

The Reverend Ray, one of two protagonists, is the most prominent of these; a ferocious bulwark of biblical fire and righteous delusion who preaches as he punishes. Though the Reverend believes he is the conduit for God's fury, he is ultimately a broken man, driven by the guilt of his sinful past and a desire for vengeance against the killer of his brother – a complexity that reveals itself through compelling dialogue.

Aside from its writerly qualities, *Call Of Juarez* also supplies two neat innovations, the first of which is that the structure of the game is divided into alternate sequences of escape and chase. First you play as Billy, a young man forced to flee when he is wrongly accused of murder, and then you play as his relentless pursuer, the Reverend Ray.

It has to be said that the Reverend's sections are consistently more appealing, largely due to the second feature – an aiming gimmick that allows Ray to draw his two pistols in slow motion, aiming each independently of the other. Concentration Mode, as it's called, is successful in enlivening the otherwise dull and repetitive combat, and it is also in some sense true to the western – allowing you to recreate those Sergio Leone moments in which a stranger with a quick trigger-finger takes down four opponents before they've fired a shot.

This handful of ideas, and the rendering of the game's grizzled cast, is The Good. That which remains is The Bad and The Ugly. Although *Call Of Juarez* has some fine story elements, the way they are presented is inept and frustrating. For the first two or so hours of the game you find yourself continuously harassed by interruptions that wrest control from you – cutscenes, instructional pop-ups, pauses whilst the game saves, epic level loads, etc. Frustrations are compounded by the depressing gracelessness with which so much of the game progresses. Billy's sections are a limp mixture of stealth gameplay and cumbersome jumping puzzles, and, by and large, the level design fails to make use of the Reverend's potential for interesting gunplay; enemies are employed as little more than a monotonous swarm of Stetsons and sombreros for you to fire at.

Even the story, the one thing that a mechanically unsound game might fall back upon, jerks along erratically in between its few moments of persuasive drama. *Call Of Juarez* has mined its source material well, collecting a wealth of imagery that it then squanders on lacklustre and dysfunctional gameplay. The gun's good, but the chamber's empty. **[5]**



The Reverend's sections end in a shootout with a single enemy – a feature which you unlock as a standalone game mode the further you progress. It makes a welcome change from the usual protracted boss battle





When in Concentration Mode, the two reticules slowly move towards each other, allowing you enough time before they meet to shoot at several different enemies



Billy's much weaker than the Reverend and won't survive long in a direct confrontation. But if he can remain hidden, he can quietly pick off his foes with arrows





Despite being a violent game, content to let the player bloodily slaughter hundreds upon hundreds of men, *Call Of Juarez* enforces a bizarre morality: harming a civilian, horse or a corpse initiates an immediate fail-state

Holy writ



Eavesdropping on conversations between NPCs is worthwhile, as much of the game's dialogue is well-written and entertaining. It's also in the exchanges between the Reverend and his hapless enemies that your character's warped psychology is exposed: near the beginning of the game, the Reverend finds his authority eloquently challenged by Clyde Forrester, the obnoxious owner of the local drinking establishment and whorehouse, who points out that the Reverend would be out of a job if it wasn't for sinners such as himself. The Reverend then proceeds to burn down the saloon. "We're two sides of the same coin!" says the publican and pimp, shortly before being perforated by a piece of lead.



NUCLEUS

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £5 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: KUJU SURREY

Nucleus is a game that has been over-concepted. It's basically a shooting game, but with elements of strategy incorporated thanks to your craft's ability to manipulate certain types of cell within the levels. The game is themed around the human body, so enemies are presented as bacteria or viruses, levels can be set in a moving bloodstream, and your weapons include the lamentably named protein bomb.

There does seem to be the germ of an idea in the cell manipulation: your squid-like craft can use a tractor beam on nearby cells, which not only drags them around but also helps nearby cells to attach to the cluster. This increases protein drops (collectable energy, essentially) as well as acting as a shield. Manoeuvring the cells around the floaty environment can be quite cathartic, and a welcome break from the poor implementation of the remainder of the game. But the idea is never really exploited to its full potential, and stands more as an exemplar of what could have been – and although the later levels offer a big enough challenge, when the action becomes hectic it unforgiveably suffers from slowdown.

Nucleus stands as a poorly executed game in a field where there are so many excellent others that it's impossible to recommend. There are some nice ideas and a good diversity within the stages, and then there are horribly overburdened sections that don't work. *Nucleus* may look it, but it's not particularly original, and the movement in particular feels sloppy. Of all the things it should have learned from its superiors in the field, two stand out: building on solid fundamentals, and simplicity. **[4]**





The in-body setting isn't made much use of beyond the background flavourings – which can be diverting in a bad way, with the generally muted purples, blues and reds mixing confusingly







The cells are the strategic key to many of the objective-led levels, which typically involve surviving for a set length of time. The key is to create a wall to gather opponents behind before launching the offensive



SUPER STARDUST HD

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £5 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: HOUSEMARQUE



***Super Stardust HD* can look very pretty indeed on a hi-def panel, its explosions, pyrotechnics and shrapnel throwing up some dizzying scenes**

Geometry Wars is as defining a shooter as exists – its updating of the *Robotron* control method for modern analogue sticks has since been incorporated into many examples of the genre, and *Super Stardust HD* is another template-tweaker. But originality has never been a staple of the *Stardust* series, the basic idea being an update of *Asteroids*, and the shoot 'em up in general probably the greatest recycler of its heritage in gaming. From the giant centipedes that attack to the bombs that clear everything onscreen, *Stardust* wears a rock-solid history on its modern-shooter sleeve.

Your craft moves around a 3D planet, but on a single plane, therefore making the game effectively a 2D shooter, although the viewpoint does allow some visibility of what's going on around the sphere, which is needed for the more hectic moments of later levels when you'll need to rush to safety. *SSHD*'s greatest moments are here, when the screen is filled with exploding asteroids and multiple enemies chasing down your ship – the combination of which produces a cluster that can be difficult to manage or navigate through – and your survival is always on a knife-edge.

You have three interchangeable weapons which can all be upgraded and have different effects on asteroids and enemies. Your ship also has a boost and can collect bombs and a shield. Enemies range from simple saucers that hone in on your position to more sophisticated foes that will dodge incoming fire, or suddenly increase their speed to ram you. *SSHD* provides a big challenge, and a co-op mode and leaderboard make it a lasting one. In a growing field of downloadable shooters, it stands out as one of the best. **[8]**



Your three weapons have different properties, and can reach heaving levels of destruction: here, the gold splitter is raking over the enemies, though it's less powerful than the slower rock crusher and ice splitter





MARIO PARTY 8

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: HUDSON SOFT







Along with the control issues, the games' length is also disheartening. Punching statues or shaking up fizzy drinks needs to be drawn out into endurance games – rapid shaking of the Remote for five seconds does not make a good challenge

Originally baked in 1998, *Mario Party* is that cake that just never seems to get eaten. Growing staler by the day, hungry Nintendophiles still wolf it down, washing away its unpleasantness with litres of other, better franchises.

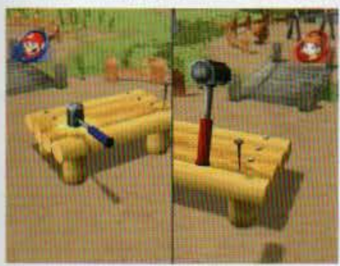
Criticism has often been aimed at Hudson's perpetual shrug of the shoulders as to how to milk new games from the same old buttons and analogue stick setup, yet here we find all-new motion controls and still no freshness. Ten games of the 70 available call for rabid shaking, a tilt to steer in a racing game resurfaces seven times with different vehicles, and the shooting galleries do little to differentiate themselves.

Cheaper still are games clearly designed for the GameCube's analogue stick and 'A' button, simply shifted onto the world's tiniest D-pad and the uncharismatic '2' button. A few of these patented 'run about bashing foes on a platform of reducing size' games were always to be expected, but 15 out of 70 games? Even Rayman's rabbids knew not to push their poorly conceived pig racing beyond the ten mark.

This lack of inventiveness is a shame. With *Rayman* denying fourplayer simultaneous play and *Monkey Ball* sporting fun games but no decent structure within which to tackle them, Wii owners are still waiting for that killer title to merge minigames into a coherent party experience. And while the eighth instalment suffers from the same drawn-out menu treks of the previous seven, the board design does offer some of the best strategic options yet.

Streamlined boards allow for more predictable move outcomes, complementing the character-morphing sweeties that aid the player's quest for between-game coin and star snatching. That the usually insufferable boardgame trappings spark any amount of contemplation is probably a side effect of the dire minigames. It's difficult to tell, for while the original's analogue stick twizzlings at least left seeping stigmata in the gamer's palm, *Mario Party 8* comes and goes like the indifferent pop of a cracker. **[4]**





A few games try harder than most. The DIY challenge has players mimicking a variety of tool movements, à la *Cooking Mama*, but too many simply boil down to random shakings of the controllers or D-pad button-mashing



RESIDENT EVIL 4: WII EDITION

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E176

With no additional content over the PS2 edition, the Wii port of *RE4* may seem a little lazy. The Separate Ways chapter, costume changes, laser gun and a true widescreen option transfer intact, so none but owners of the original GameCube version will see anything new here. Graphics are identical to that GameCube release, then a technical achievement but now little indication of the Wii's capabilities.

It's also easy to assume that this is another unwise attempt to shoehorn the Wii Remote into a game that already worked perfectly well. The original's slow thumbstick-controlled crosshair made itself a fundamental part of the action by enforcing a measured approach, even in the face of chaos: catch breath, focus, aim, control the crowd.

Aiming through the Wii Remote modifies this dynamic, but only subtly. It's easier to speedily notch up headshots and switch between separate targets, but this benefit is countered by the fact that panic can now turn a controlled situation into a fatal one. The original's slow crosshair actually helped keep things calm, even if foes unexpectedly got into close range. In comparison, the Wii edition requires a much steadier hand. The new freedom means you'll often find yourself losing composure at an unanticipated lunge and shooting offscreen in fright. It feels a little more natural, and the new balance of accuracy and risk requires even more care to keep enemies managed.





The inhibited movement of the original is reduced here thanks to the Remote, which speeds up aiming. The protracted tension of tactical crowd control is exchanged for moments of sheer panic as you flail and overshoot your foe

The controls are well mapped to the Remote and Nunchuck; commendably, they only deviate from the original scheme as far as they have to. Some of the game's QTE sections, notably speed-tapping during sequences in which Leon is running for his life, are replaced with Remote shaking, adding a little physicality. The only jarring aspect is that it retains thumbstick control over the inventory screen when you really feel you should be pointing and rotating.

And that is that: the Wii edition sends players on the same astonishing, grisly funfair ride with a slight new twist. But, though it does little to take the experience to new heights, *Resident Evil 4* is still an immense pleasure to return to. **[9]**



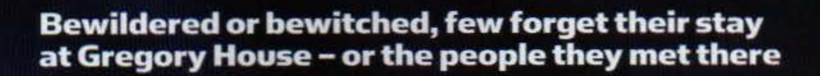
It's difficult to begrudge a port of a game that is this good, regardless of how much or little it has changed. The minor tweaks are fine, however, and hopefully *RE4* will find a new audience on Wii


PlayStation.2
SHOW

TIME EXTEND

GREGORY HORROR SHOW

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2003**



Bewildered or bewitched, few forget their stay at Gregory House – or the people they met there

A door slams, floorboards creak, and through the darkened hallway roams that familiar plodding figure. Gregory, candle in hand, is making his rounds, checking the rooms to ensure that his charges are sleeping soundly. Welcome to Gregory House, an example of sinister videogame real estate that fits in somewhere between Luigi's mansion and Jet Set Willy's rambling home. But isn't this just one more haunted house to add to the list? An empty shell painted with nothing but shadows and cobwebbing? Not quite, because this particular ghost-shack is packed to the rafters with all kinds of company.

The bad news is that you've gone mad: a complete psychological collapse that's left you trapped inside an imaginary hotel, where the only promise of escape comes in the form of a cheery, Bronx-accented Death, who coaxes you out into the corridors each night to steal the souls of the other guests, risking life and limb, braving paranoia, melancholy, and a giant syringe through the head. But don't worry – it's just a game, isn't it? Just a simple collect 'em up from Capcom, with charming cardboard graphics and a cast of eccentrics. What could possibly be less threatening?

But there's more bad news ahead: the game's gone mad too – at least it certainly seems that way. *Gregory Horror Show* gives the impression of suffering from an identity crisis, perched somewhere between the childlike visuals of *Animal Crossing* and the creeping sadism of *Silent Hill*. So while the garishly colourful characters who romp around Gregory House suggest a carefree laugh-in of *Paper Mario* proportions, in reality the game feels muted, and those zany guests, with names like Neko Zombie and Hell's Chef, seem either transfixed by incomprehensible manias or burdened with considerable worry.

For those familiar with the original IP, this should hardly come as a surprise. Based on Naomi Iwata's anime, Capcom's game is fervently true to its subject matter, borrowing sound cues, characters and even some entire animation sequences. Yet, for the uninitiated, the fact that this apparently cute game turns out to be something of a survival horror – and an exacting and punitive one at that – is often too much to take. Many players quit in disgust early on, convinced that the missions are obscure, the health system utterly baffling, and that its particularly lethargic variety of stealth is ultimately tedious.

A simple collect 'em up from Capcom, with charming cardboard graphics and a cast of eccentrics. What could be less threatening?

Manipulating guests in *Gregory Horror Show* is made harder given that you're not in the lofty god-like position of a *Sims* player, looking down on your world and tweaking the variables with impunity. Here, the player must live among the other characters, a fellow rat caught in the same maze and trying to escape

To some extent, who could blame them? There's no denying that, on a mechanical level, *Gregory Horror Show* often frustrates. Drawing from the psychological cues of the anime series, one of the game's central conceits is that it's your mental rather than physical health that is endangered throughout your stay. On paper, that's a simple transposing of one term for another, but in reality players used to established concepts like medipacks suddenly have to get their heads around a confusing mess of herbs, juices, and – strangest of all – books, any of which can be used to restore mental health to different degrees. Equally, over time, a fiddly array of status effects, ranging from Tiredness to Confusion and right





GUEST STARS

Naomi Iwata's original character designs bring life and humour to what is often a fairly downbeat game, and the sheer variety of the guest roster is itself a simple joy. And despite their child-friendly appearance, a closer look at your fellow guests hints at the game's darker aspects. Tellingly, almost every character has something a little bit wrong about them, from Gregory's sagging eyes and warts to the drool coming from Roulette Boy's mouth. The effect goes some way towards exploring what the *Animal Crossing* gang might look like after a long night on horse tranquillisers. This is a game filled with details, and the longer you spend following the guests, the more of their inner lives you come to understand.



If *Gregory Horror Show* plays a little like *Pac-Man* in places, it lacks the power pills. With no means of direct attack and protection, other than a banana peel dropped on the ground, your only option is to run. So you're not only a stalker and a prankster, but a coward too

through to Melancholy, will kick in to muddle matters further.

Yet if it stumbles over the easy ground, Capcom's game can boast of a startling achievement in more complex territory. *Gregory Horror Show* succeeds in creating what many designers have long felt is impossible: a singleplayer videogame genuinely focused on group interaction.

So it's all about manipulating the NPCs. But this is no *Sims*-by-numbers. Although success in parting each guest from their soul requires the familiar task of engaging with, and ultimately coming to understand the characters around you, the cast is far more complex than the mix of stereotypes on offer in Maxis's games. From Angel Dog to Roulette Boy, and from the sensuously sadistic Nurse Catherine to the mysterious, beautiful TV Fish who swims through the basements, *Gregory Horror Show* has gathered a group of the most amusing, terrifying and fascinating characters you'll ever meet in a game.

And it's lucky that they do fascinate, because the game revolves almost entirely around watching from a safe vantage point, and following them doggedly as their clockwork whims take them around the hotel. While all the sneaking and spying may at first seem like tedious drudgery, it slowly blossoms into something entirely unexpected, becoming first diverting, and then utterly compelling. The glimpses of your fellow guests' private lives are both comical and affecting: even the most freakish and villainous of them have moments of surprising tenderness. Spying on the horrific Catherine as she sobs and gorges on doughnuts in front of her favourite TV show means you won't feel quite the same way about her the next time she plunges her giant syringe into your head, and watching the schizophrenic Lost Doll pick flowers in the garden helps humanise one of gaming's most abstractly frightening creations.

The results of such an approach is a genuinely fresh take on stealth, dragging a tired mechanic away from its comfort spot in a world of midnight factories and missile silos, removing the familiar justifications of nuclear geopolitics, and instead placing it firmly in a domestic setting that, while skewed, remains recognisably human. This, for once, is a stealth game that asks you to really think about privacy: it's an issue raised every time you go to peer through a keyhole, every time you turn over another guest's room in the hopes of finding a useful herb and discover, instead, something intimate – the book they've been reading, or the fact that the bed that has recently been vacated is still 'slightly warm'.

Mid-way through the adventure, despite the other guests' vicious attacks, you may find yourself questioning just who the real villain is

And mid-way through the adventure, despite the other guests' vicious attacks or disturbing habits, and despite the fact that the game's manual is at pains to inform you that the guests themselves have stolen the souls they so jealously guard, you may find yourself questioning just who the real villain is. Seldom has a game's hero been asked to behave so unheroically. What initially seemed like a straightforward set of missions soon turns into something more gleefully troubling: you're not just invading these imaginary characters' privacy, you're asked to exploit them for your own benefit. More often than not, the best way to get control of a character's soul is to sound out their psychological weakness, and then home in for the kill. That means preying on Cactus Gunman's inherent paranoia, for example, knocking on his door and running away again until, overwhelmed by panic, he drops his soul and runs off to hide. And knockdown ginger turns out to be the least of your crimes. As the game



Your character, who can be either male or female, has a deceptively innocent face given much of the chaos you orchestrate. It's a perfect canvas for the strange litany of status ailments that will be inflicted on you



The guests at Gregory House may be freakish and hugely exaggerated, but success in the game comes from understanding and charting not only their actions, but their motivations, and on a far more nuanced level than the 'sleepy/hungry/happy' scale employed by games like *The Sims*



Don't believe the screenshots: *Gregory Horror Show* is far more muted and troubled than a game with a fortune-telling frog (also a save point) should be





progresses, you'll be asked to spoil a chef's cooking, trip people up with banana skins, and on one memorably queasy occasion manipulate a child's familial guilt to get to his father.

What gives this a dark thrill that other more violent games often lack is that it's real-world wrongdoing, and wrongdoing against characters who, although not always sympathetic, you have first had to come to know. Games are often about exploiting an enemy's weakspots, but it's more likely to be something along the lines of a large glowing eye rather than a pronounced tendency towards loneliness. Putting the boot in here can feel far more unpleasant than murdering prostitutes in Vice City.

And true to its focus on character, the game doesn't just ask you to do the unthinkable, it makes sure you live with the consequences of your actions afterwards. Your victims don't simply disappear once you've beaten them. They live on, night after night, harbouring dangerous grudges against you. By the fourth evening, this sedate, somewhat sleepy game has become a poisonous and warped version of *Pac-Man*, as yesterday's victims pursue you mercilessly through the corridors of the hotel, while you frantically try to manipulate any newcomers into handing over fresh souls.

So, while the health system is a mess, progress can be confusing and many have found the constant lurking and running away anathema to the reasons they pick up a control pad in the first place, the focus on fleshing out its supporting cast until they feel like real people means that *Gregory Horror Show* achieves something far more impressive than other, more rounded titles ever could. And while each character is still in effect nothing more than a time management and lateral thinking problem, while the nuts and bolts of your physical interaction with them is limited, the real puzzle is understanding the other guest on a deep enough level to catch them at their most vulnerable or goad them into losing their composure.

If it's true that we spend so much time in games shooting people because that's the only interaction we can yet recreate with any real success, then *Gregory Horror Show*, the flop from Capcom with the misleadingly cutesy cardboard weirdos, is significantly ahead of the pack. And if that's the case, then this mad little game that confused so many of its own players may be surprisingly clear-headed after all.

あの子が取ったのね！
許さないわよ〜！



HORROR SHOW BUSINESS

Not a million miles away from *Manhunt*'s execution clips, if a pursuing guest catches you while moving around the hotel, you'll be subjected to a Horror Show: a short cutscene detailing their revenge upon you. While the outcomes of these occasions often add up to little more than a slight loss of mental health, the Horror Shows are both darkly comic and, given the childlike graphics, surprisingly forceful. Ranging from a blow from a machete to a prolonged and frankly unpleasant blood test, head trauma is a recurrent theme.



THE MAKING OF...
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Branching paths and moral mazes: BioWare explains how luck, statistics and poker defined a genre

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **LUCASARTS** DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE** ORIGIN: **CANADA** RELEASE DATE: **2003**

It was an innocent-looking email that set the planets spinning on what became one of the most ambitious RPGs ever made. In 1999, and after a series of lacklustre Star Wars tie-ins, Simon Jeffery, the president of LucasArts Entertainment, was looking for new developers to bring back some sparkle to the world's most licensed intellectual property. After, in their words, "picking each other up off the floor," it was a matter of seconds before **Ray Muzyka**, BioWare's CEO and **Greg Zuschek**, BioWare's president, said yes.

"Frankly, it was very intimidating working with LucasArts because we have great respect for the Star Wars licence," begins Muzyka. "They were very good to work with and very professional. The story approval went back and forth between The Ranch and us. There's LucasArts, the videogame group, and then there is The Ranch, which is the ultimate approval group. We sent them piles of concept art and they sent them back, almost all of them improved with a few suggestions, which were actually good in retrospect. The same was true with the story. You basically had to conform to the canon of the Star Wars universe."

But from the start BioWare was afforded an unprecedented degree of freedom by LucasArts in terms of character and plot development. Given the option of a game set around the time of Star Wars: Episode II or situating it some 4,000 years prior, BioWare was instantly drawn to the latter. "We were excited by both options," continues Muzyka. "But setting it 4,000 years before was the most appealing to us because there was a lot more creative latitude to help us build a formal story that could be later incorporated into the Star Wars universe. The only materials around that time period were a series of six graphic novel comic books from Dark Horse comics, the Tales of the Jedi series."

With the likes of *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* under its belt, BioWare already had a reputation for lengthy, multi-layered RPGs and only agreed to the project on certain conditions. Although it won't disclose the intimate details of those arrangements, the fact it took four years to develop and remains one of the highlights of Star Wars merchandising means it's probably safe to assume that creative autonomy and internal project management were mentioned.

"We undertake a really huge pre-production phase. It took a year of planning before we actually started creating stuff. One of the biggest challenges was visualising how a game like this would be possible"

Zuschek outlines BioWare's game-making process: "We undertake a really huge pre-production phase. It literally took a year of preplanning before we actually started creating stuff. Halfway through that year we



While the number of planets that could be landed on was limited, they were diverse, occasionally atmospherically beautiful, and all bore the all-important Star Wars flavour



LUCK OF THE DRAW

Swoop Racing was fun but if there was one game capable of notching up a few more hours away from your epic quest it was Pazaak, a sort of cross between Magic: The Gathering and Blackjack. A basic Pazaak deck could be purchased at the start of the game from Garouk in the Taris cantina though extra cards could be bought, won or found on your travels. From your deck you choose ten cards for use during a game (each with a value from -6 to +6) and the idea is to get 20, or as close as possible, by drawing cards alternately against your opponent. Go over this amount and you go 'bust'. Like all good card games, winning required some luck – though tactics, a varied deck and canny selection of cards would always give you an advantage.

started developing technology. One of the biggest challenges was simply visualising how a game like this would be possible. We're very ambitious and are always trying to push the envelope as we develop our games. It's hard to remember what it was like back in 2000 when we started, but at that time there weren't any thirdperson-perspective roleplaying games that were this close to the action, so even imagining what it would look like to play was difficult."

It was BioWare's first console game, *MDK 2: Armageddon*, that provided the springboard for its ambitions. Test areas and scenarios were created in the *MDK2* engine to try to accomplish the team's technological goals – everything from camera angles and combat through to movement and player speeds. Unlike many western RPGs – think the *Wizardry* or *Ultima* series – BioWare's games always hid the number-crunching wherever possible. This ability to empower players with complex combat interactions, yet with all the dice-rolling happening invisibly behind the scenes, was especially important for an Xbox audience.



Selecting crystals for your Jedis' lightsabers could enhance their combat stats significantly. Workbenches were available on all planets to allow essential weapon upgrades and alteration

"Certainly one of the biggest challenges in designing for a console audience is around achieving transparency, accessibility and depth all at the same time," continues Muzyka. "Optimising the control system and interface was also important. We've found that most console gamers want to just jump right in and start playing without having to map any keys or buttons, so we kept that in mind as we were designing. Our approach was always to blend together the best practices of both console and PC RPGs and build the best RPG for both systems."

The combat always presented a danger of getting bogged down in a turn-based mire, but the decision to let players queue up combat priorities, yet switch targets on the fly with the triggers or pause the game to adjust strategy, was inspired. Each encounter became a wondrously simulated set-piece worthy of any Star Wars movie – lightsabers humming and arcing through the fray, sparks crackling from blasters. The ability to rotate the camera around the lightshow merely added to the spectacle.

"We wanted to create an RPG that represented a true evolution of games like *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*," continues Zeschuck. "That meant making use of a sophisticated rules system that was tactical and customisable. We also made some specific changes to allow the player to decide what each attack should be, and to speed up the pace of combat and create a pseudo-turn-based/realtime system to make it much more exciting. Finally, there was a Star Wars pen-and-paper ruleboo which used the d20 Wizards Of The Coast system that seemed well-suited to what we were building; we took inspiration fro the system rather than using it as direct guide, but it was helpful."

Indeed, if one aspect of *KOTO* summed up BioWare's philosophy of game-making it was Pazaak, th Blackjack-style card game that became as much of a fanboy talking point as the good/evil dichotomy. It served an importan purpose by providing a fun 'mini' game but also added that crucial layer of texture, reaching out beyond the cycle of exploration, conversation and combat and made a gesture towards a grande illusion: that the world itself operated independently of your actions with a consistent, believable set of rules.

Pazaak, which was heavily influenced by classic gambling games, is for Muzyka life and gaming in microcosm. "Poker is one of my all-time favourite games," he states. "It's got a bit o everything – strategy, psychology, luck and statistics. I find it very relaxing and if I have free time to play games I play computer and console games and poker."

"One of the biggest challenges in designing for a console is achieving transparency, accessibility and depth at the same time"

Bluff and double-bluff, har negotiation, making seemingly insignificant choices that could result in literally Earth-shattering consequences was at the heart of



KOTOR was criticised for a lack of challenging combat, but this was a conscious decision by BioWare, with a difficulty slider making it even easier if you just wanted to get on with the game





the experience. Morality was in the game everywhere. When you were tasked with rescuing a Jawa from a tribe of Sand People on Tatooine you we're encouraged to go in all guns blazing. While a more laborious way to complete the mission was available through barter, the direct route inevitably led to something bordering on ethnic cleansing. Then there was the King Solomon moment on Dantooine where your judgement in a murder conspiracy could lead directly to a guilty verdict for both main suspects.

"I really enjoyed the branching narrative in the game," continues Muzyka. "It provided the opportunity for a ton of replay. There were multiple different endings and you could make choices for good or evil, and furthermore see these reflected in your character's appearance and abilities. *Knights Of The Old Republic* really allowed you to feel like you were becoming a noble Jedi Knight or evil Lord of the Sith. My two personal favourite scenes in *KOTOR* were the moment of revelation about ten hours in, when you learn that your character is Revan. And then near the end, if you were pursuing the evil path, party members who would have accompanied you for 40-60 hours to that point would object to your actions and you had to decide if they would live or die, which because of your emotional investment was very difficult."

And what characters they created. In an industry ridiculed for derivative characterisation and hokey plots, *KOTOR* stood out like a droid in a cantina bar. Whether you empathised with Canderous Ordo's lengthy, hard-bitten tales of machismo or revelled in the nihilistic asides of HK-47, there was a character for everyone to love and, significantly, each had their own quirks and inconsistencies.

Since *KOTOR* was released, moral decision-making in games has become common – think *Fable* or *Fahrenheit* – but none have done it with such insight. Fortunately it's a strain the company is evolving for its next game. "Now we've evolved the morality system to what you'll see in *Mass Effect*, which is much more sophisticated and goes beyond mere 'good and evil' options," concludes Muzyka. "We've totally replaced the idea of a simplistic path by putting the player in a position where their mission is so important – the fate of all humanity lies in your hands! – so they truly can't let anything stand in their way. In *Mass Effect* all life in the galaxy hinges on your every action, so you are well justified in doing anything that's necessary to get the job done. In other words, you'll have good reasons to sometimes do bad things."

Another epic with morality at its heart is some proposition, especially one that once again combines BioWare's classic formula of strategy, psychology, luck and statistics, even if it's not based on the blessed d20.



For *KOTOR*'s world, BioWare deliberately steered away from using the colour red, deciding in tests that it didn't display efficiently (although it does appear in power bars and other indicators)



BioWare made a concerted effort to appeal to console gamers by increasing the pace of the game. This included far more combat and leaner dialogue than in previous RPG titles such as *Baldur's Gate*



GREEN BUG-EARED MONSTER

Although lofty, epic and absorbing, the very fabric of consistency *KOTOR* was founded upon was capable of occasionally ripping, as Zuschek is all too willing to admit: "Some of the funniest moments in game development come from strange bugs that pop up now and then. One day Carth showed up as just two floating eyeballs and a set of teeth. In another build of the game, our tiny Yoda-like character had one ear that stretched nearly six feet above his head. And for some reason, the start menu one day showed Malak with one arm withered and curled up like a hook. But our favourite was the day that Bastila's animation bones were accidentally duplicated – she was fully playable and functioned normally in every way – except she was stretched into a skinny, gangly, 12-foot-tall monster!"





One of the game's finest features was the ability to take up to two crew members on planet-based missions. This built up an affinity with favoured members but also gave the game great replayability

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

NAME: Pyro Studios S.L

DATE FOUNDED: 1996

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 120

KEY STAFF: CEO Ignacio Pérez Dolset, general manager Jorge Bazaco and development director Francois Coulon



URL: www.pyrostudios.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Commandos: Behind Enemy lines, Commandos: Beyond The Call Of Duty, Commandos 2: Men Of Courage, Praetorians, Commandos 3: Destination Berlin, Imperial Glory, Commandos Strike Force







The first *Commandos* game hit the top spot in videogame charts around the world, while *Imperial Glory* (above) made it to number two in the UK





LOCATION:
Madrid, Spain

CURRENT PROJECTS:
A new MMOG, an Xbox 360 and PS3 action FPS, a Wii game based on new IP and a multiplatform release based on Ilion Animation Studios' Planet One.

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Situated in Madrid, in the heart of Spain, Pyro Studios prides itself on creating original IPs and high quality titles for both PC and consoles since 1996. Best known for its *Commandos* franchise, Pyro has also released acclaimed titles such as *Imperial Glory* and *Praetorians*. The studio has an international staff of 130, and is currently developing four original titles for PC and consoles.

"The first project, based on a new high-profile animated movie franchise from sister company Ilion Animation Studios, provides Pyro with exclusive access to an exclusive movie IP. Other projects include a shooter for 60 and PS3, plus projects for the Wii and PC.

"Pyro Studios is part of the third-largest digital entertainment group in Europe, combining a strong financial backing and independence with ambition."





University profile

Like Top Trumps, but for universities

INSTITUTION NAME: University College for the Creative Arts at Farnham

NUMBER OF STUDENTS: 2,500

URL: www.ucreative.ac.uk/dgd

CONTACT: dgd@ucreative.ac.uk, +44 (0) 1252 722441



KEY STAFF

Jon Weinbren, course leader, MA Digital Games Design;
Steve Brown, senior lecturer, MA Digital Games Design

KEY ALUMNI

Tom Law, game designer at Frontier Developments;
Magali Stretton, game designer at Rocksteady Studios;
Joe Ryan, artist at Lexicon Entertainment







The MA in Digital Game Design at Farnham combines technique, analysis and practice with excellent links with game development firms

universitycollege for the creative arts



LOCATION:
Farnham, Surrey

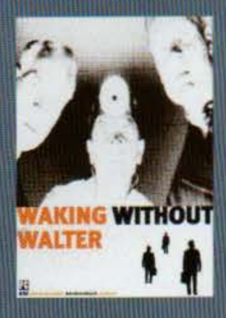
COURSES OFFERED:
MA Digital Games Design

INSIDE VIEW – MELINDA GRACIAS – MA DIGITAL GAME DESIGN



"I began the digital game design course at Farnham shortly after completing my BA in graphic design. The course was well structured, allowing me to gain creative and technical skills in all aspects of game development as well as a deep understanding of game design. We were also encouraged to conduct high-level research into contemporary issues in game design and virtual worlds – this enabled me to ensure that my practical work was always well informed. By the end of the year I used the skill and knowledge I had gained to produce a rich and interesting final project, Waking Without Walter – exhibited at a Masters showcase at 01zero-one in Soho.

"While on the course facilities were never lacking and tutors were always available for any guidance that we required. I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Farnham and would recommend it to anyone interested in learning more about game design at masters level. After the course I found work at game developers Playgen and design company Boomerang. I am currently working as a game designer for Imaginary."



Good and bad vibrations

The rise and eventual fall of a small UK company that became a world leader in 3D audio



Formed in 1996, 3D audio specialist Sensaura was one of the success stories of UK gaming technology. With fewer than 20 staff, it became a primary supplier of 3D audio technology to most PC audio chip manufacturers, as well as for the Xbox, before launching GameCODA, one of the first pieces of cross-platform console audio middleware.

The cycle of birth and death affects technology companies in terms of the invention and obsolescent of their products, something which eventually can threaten their commercial rationally. What's rarer to experience, however, is the entire lifespan passing off without a nasty ending such as bankruptcy or hostile takeover. Sensaura was closed down by parent Creative Labs in May, and its rather gentle departure provides exactly such an opportunity.

"We're the victims of economic circumstance," reckons **Doug Balfour**, now Sensaura's ex-MD. "It's nothing to do with the staff. Creative is giving its different product groups more autonomy and one result is the R&D budget of our group is being reduced. As much as I regret it, I have to say it's the right decision for Creative."

The Sensaura story begun in the early 1990s with Alastair Sibbald, who was the chief scientist at EMI's Central Research Labs. So the story goes, while lying on a beach with his eyes closed he wondered how he could work out the 3D positions of the birds above him and the sheep moving on the cliff behind despite the fact he only had two ears. Worked up into a research project by **Adam Philp**, later Sensaura's middleware development manager, it resulted in the idea that, if your brain could convert a stereo signal into 3D, by reversing the process it should also be possible to create 3D audio from a stereo setup.

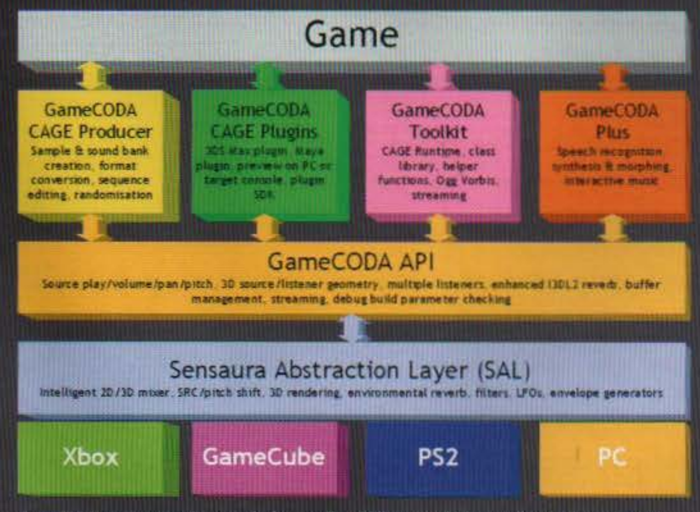
"It transpired this is easy to do using headphones but you can't play back the same signals over loudspeakers, because the left ear will hear some of the right channel, and the same with the right ear. You get signal crosstalk, which messes everything up," Philp explains.

It took another couple of years to arrive at a crosstalk-cancellation system. "We came up with one that worked if you were sitting in the right place and didn't move your head. If you moved, you started feeling ill," Philp recalls.

Further tweaked to increase the size of the sweetspot and ensure it degraded more comfortably away from it, the system was originally deployed on a handful of EMI classical recordings, also notching up credits on Frank Sinatra's million-selling Duets album.

But while the technology worked, it soon became clear the business model was flawed. "The idea was to charge a royalty on every CD, but we soon discovered record companies won't give up royalties. We had great technology that was on the point of getting canned," says **Peter Clare**, who later became Sensaura's technical director. "We starting looking around for other markets that might be interested."

GameCODA architecture



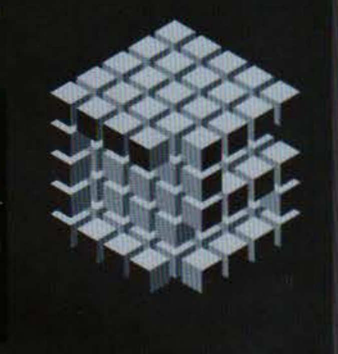
GameCODA was Sensaura's cross-platform audio middleware, which as well as having enhanced 3D audio features, included specialist editing and creation tools aimed at audio engineers


Some key Sensaura staff (from left to right): Nathan Charles, Ben Leslie, Peter Clare, Adam Philp, Neela Dass



The technical expertise of Sensaura's research was rewarded in 2001 with the Royal Academy of Engineering's MacRobert Award. Sensaura staff pictured are (below, from left to right): Peter Clare, Adam Philp, Richard Clemow, David Monteith and Alastair Sibbald. Clemow, Monteith and Sibbald left Sensaura in 2002





It was about this time that US company Aureal Semiconductor was starting to evangelise its 3D audio technology, while Microsoft also announced it would be including DirectSound3D, a standardised approach to 3D audio, in its DirectX API.

"We knew nothing about PC audio, but after looking at the business we discovered there were only half a dozen major sound chip manufactures, and three companies, Yamaha, ESS and Crystal Semiconductor, had about 70 per cent of the market," Clare says. "It was easy to talk to the important people and they were all interested in licensing our technology, particularly after Aureal changed its business direction, moving into chip manufacture."



"People talk about Creative as if it's some big, evil giant. It's not. It's an ethical, decent company"

As Aureal started to compete with companies which had previously been its clients, it forced them to look for replacements. Sensaura fitted the bill. The big breakthrough came at Comdex 1997, where Sensaura had its technology working with the big three chip companies. By January 1998, Sensaura 3D Positional Audio (snappily known as S-3DPA) was shipping.

Still, in those early days of 3D audio, the atmosphere was one more of co-operation, not competition. "We spent a lot of time talking to developers, but it was more about 3D audio, not Sensaura," says **Neela Dass**, who became the first official employee of Sensaura Ltd in April 1998 as part of Scipher, a group of companies spun out of the Central Research Labs. "The more titles that used 3D audio, the more gamers bought soundcards and that eventually fed back into orders with the chip manufacturers," she explains.

The year 2000 proved to be a pivotal one for Sensaura. Such was its status in the PC audio market when Microsoft announced Xbox, it had agreements in place with all the companies bidding for the audio hardware work, including the eventual winner Nvidia. Then, in February, Sensaura's parent company Scipher floated on the UK stock exchange. At one point, it had a market capitalisation of over $1 billion. However, after a long-running legal dispute with Creative Labs, Aureal went bust. Creative acquired all its assets for $32 million.

Yet perhaps as significant for the company's long-term status was the shift that occurred in the soundcard market as the features only included on buy-in boards switched to software codecs or integrated on to motherboards. Sensaura sold plenty of licences and its volumes went up, but its margins went down.

Further encouragement came from developers themselves. "They'd ask us how to support 3D audio, and we'd say: 'Use DirectSound', but it got us thinking, maybe we should make something that was able to do a bit more than DirectSound," Dass says.

Originally, the S-3DPA API was ported on to PS2, but developers said they wanted more than just 3D audio on one platform. The result was GameCODA, a middleware solution encapsulating the low-level API, as well as audio authoring and sound design tools, which linked into existing production pipelines such the 3ds Max and Maya art packages.

The middleware market proved to be very different to the audio chip market, however. In one example, it took two years of meetings to get the official go-ahead from Nintendo to offer the GameCODA on GameCube.

"It took a lot longer to do deals. Middleware's a hard business in which to make real money," says Balfour. Early licensees such as Lionhead helped build the product's credibility, however, and combined with its existing chip licensing cashflow, so Sensaura remained one of Scipher's few profitable divisions.

And with the internet stock boom well over, it was this success that eventually sealed Sensaura's fate. "Scipher needed money and although we were profitable it made more sense to sell us," Balfour explains. "It was difficult for me though because this wasn't made public, so I was disappearing off to try and sell the company, and I couldn't tell anyone."

Several companies were interested, but the final choice came down to Creative Labs, which paid $6.4 million in December 2003 – something of a bargain considering the $32 million it had paid for Aureal's assets.

And Balfour feels that, at the end of the day, the change of ownership saved Sensaura – if only for a couple of years. "If Creative hadn't bought us, within six months we would have downsized to two people; one to collect the money and one to fix any bugs. People talk about Creative as if it's some big, evil giant. It's not. It's an ethical, decent company where people are given freedom to try and develop things."

So despite the official ending of the Sensaura name and brand, some staff will continue to develop new audio technology. Ben Leslie is heading up the new dev team, which is currently working on an unannounced project, while Nathan Charles will continue to chair the Khronos Group's OpenSL ES audio API for embedded devices.

"It would have been easier to shut us down entirely," Balfour concludes. "The reason this hasn't happened is a strong belief that the technology and expertise that's been developed has a major contribution to make, and that to my mind means Sensaura lives on, even if no longer in name."


Sensaura's solution to creating 3D audio from two channels was easy to solve with headphones but much harder when it came to stereo loudspeakers

BY JEFF MINTER

BUREAUCRACY AND (TWO) BUGS

Gnnngh. It's taking forever to release *Space Giraffe*. The last couple of weeks I've been more of a marketing dude and a clerk than a game designer and programmer. "Please describe your game in 25 words. Describe your game in 50 words. Describe your game in 100 words." Trial game description, full game description, banners of this shape, that shape and the other shape, 35 screenshots, 15 in Japanese, 30-second trailer video, 60-second trailer video, ten minutes of gameplay video, ratings forms: "Is there any sex in it?" NO, it's completely abstract. "Is there any blood in it?" NO, it's completely abstract. "Is there any racism in it?" NO, unless you count a campaign of genocide against abstract geometric shapes.

"You filled in the form slightly wrongly by typing outside of the grey bits." Aargh! "These bits need to be signed, initialled and faxed." Fax? Who the smeg uses fax? "The screaming flower of level 81 is not visible in the provided videos, please provide some more." CAN WE JUST RELEASE THE BLOODY THING, PLEASE?

It feels like one of those long train journeys where, just as you're about to arrive at the destination station and already getting up to head towards the door of the train, it stops at a red signal and proceeds to remain there at rest for an unspecified, unpredictable and annoying length of time. As far as I'm concerned everything is done, all the translators have finished, it's over, I just want to do the things that we said we'd do when it was finished, like have a nice weekend in Amsterdam or bugger off somewhere else nice, and not have to be available at a few hours' notice in case somebody wants some text moving slightly to the left or needs another triplicate declaration that the game is devoid of nun-molestation.

I know all this is a necessary evil and there's no avoiding it, and it'll be worth it when *SG* is out there and on the download list, but bloody hell, I could have written a couple of entire Commodore 64 games in the time it's taking.

In all this time we've found precisely two bugs in the actual game: "end of level ratings being given out in English instead of the selected language" (USE_INTERNATIONAL_RATINGS not defined) and "achievement graphic showing up as an undefined box if the main language is Japanese" (fixed by adding "|| font == 3" to one line of code). So in terms of actual coding and debug *SG* hasn't been causing much stress – but, oh my, the bureaucracy. Would any games have got released back in the day if it'd been like that? Would Matthew Smith have to have declared "toilet humour" on a form for *Manic Miner*, and would the love-heart scene between Gordon Bennett and the llama in *Hover Bovver* be classed as "implied sexuality"?

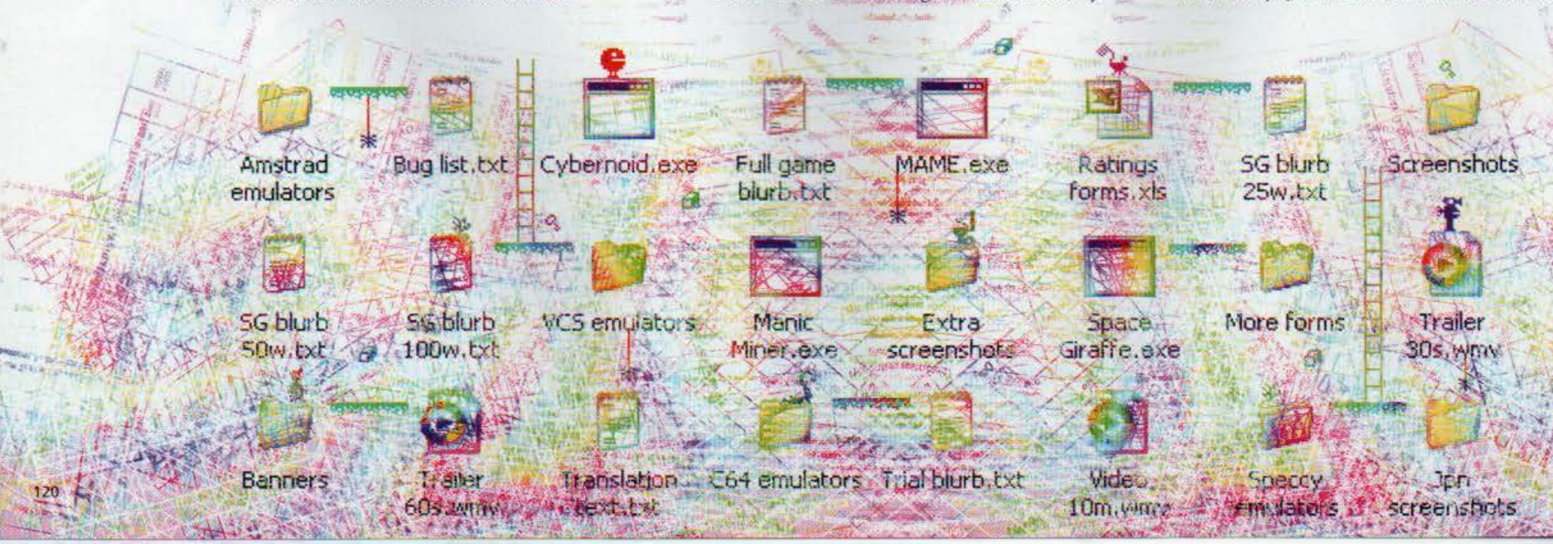
> "It's only gone to prove what I've found to be true in most aspects of retrogaming – that most old games were actually rubbish"

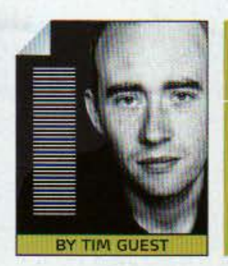
In between the form-filling, video production and marketspeaking I've been having fun with emulation on my DS, thanks to a gizmo I bought that has a teeny 2GB Micro SD card that plugs into a DS cart-shaped holder. You can shove emulators on it and run them on the DS. C64 and Atari VCS emulation work but are a bit slow, whereas Amstrad and Speccy emulations work fine. I've lobbed substantial game collections for both the Speccy and Amstrad on there and enjoyed going through both in idle DS-wielding moments. It's only gone to prove what I've found to be true in most aspects of retrogaming, from arcade through the various consoles and the home micros, C64 included: most of those old games were rubbish. Take off the rose-tinted specs, fire up MAME or your favourite emulator, and have a trawl around and you'll see it's true. Probably 95 per cent are rubbish. The remainder contains classics you recall fondly, and maybe one per cent stand out, while the rest aren't as good as you remembered.

Many designers, especially on the home computer platforms, seemed to rely on steep learning curves, and the idea of you performing perfectly-timed tasks on one screen before allowing progress to the next (*Manic Miner* being the prime exemplar, but other examples abound, as in flick-screen shooters such as *Cybernoid*). I guess such methodology arose from designers having little memory to put a lot of screens in, and wanting to keep the player from progressing too quickly, knowing that a player would rather grit his teeth and try again than spend another £7 for a new game and wait another 20 minutes for it to load. It was only with the arrival of game consoles, and competition from experienced designers who made games that were playable, that game programmers realised that they had to make games that were fun to play rather than the gaming equivalent of slamming your own nuts in a drawer repeatedly to get a high score.

Nostalgia isn't what it used to be. It's true that in the past things were more chaotic, but in truth most of the games were a bit shit, and the arrival of modern times may have brought with it pernickety bureaucracy but it's also brought better game designers and powerful hardware. I'm glad to have been a part of the past but I'm more glad to still be working at what I love doing with current technology now.

Jeff Minter is the founder of UK codeshop Llamasoft, whose most recent project was Xbox 360's onboard audio visualiser





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN Postcards from the online universe

THE END OF THE WORLD

In human history, what matters becomes matter. When Freud first hit upon the importance of dreams, it was no coincidence that, at the same time, the Lumière brothers were starting to brighten our dreams, using a lightbulb so others could see them and share in them.

And now the human race, at the end of a century of the self (and at the start of a new, brutal American century), has begun to value networks for their own sake. It's no coincidence that virtual worlds have turned our computer and social networks into actual destinations we can visit.

Yes, this column is about virtual worlds again, although perhaps for the last time. There has been much talk in the wider culture about *Second Life* recently; part of that discussion has inevitably turned to whether virtual worlds, of which *Second Life* is only one example, really have something important to offer. There's a sense of an early gold rush, without much gold: the myth that many *Second Lifers* are making money attracts people to the world, but the reality is that only a couple of hundred are making anything like a living wage from their virtual industry.

Still, IBM doesn't commit 3,000 of its employees to regular work inside *Second Life* without a reason – and that's exactly what it's done. A recent report by respected tech analyst company Gartner estimates that, by 2011, 80 per cent of internet users will have a virtual avatar.

Much *Second Life* criticism comes from the world's difficulties, and its apparent emptiness of promise. People log on, buy a pair of wings, get hit upon by someone dressed as a fox, and leave, never to return. Despite that world's opacity, it remains true that millions have made *Second Life* their second home – and that's perhaps the problem.

Virtual worlds began as a refuge from the real world, another place without loss where people could find respite. But the role of those worlds is changing. Those thousands of IBM staff don't use *Second Life* to avoid business; they use it to conduct business, to reduce their carbon footprint and to save money on the travel, communications and arrangements involved in global meetings. In some senses virtual worlds are a shared fairytale, and, as in all fairytales, only the disenchanted are free: the enchantment of virtual worlds as a panacea against loss must shift, as it is doing, into a new form of connection that serves, rather than negates, the real world.

> "Virtual worlds began as a refuge, a place without loss where people could find respite. But the role of those worlds is changing"

In early June, I held a small book launch in a London bar. Someone, I'm not saying who (it was Andrew 'Roo' Reynolds from IBM, part of a team that works on the use of virtual worlds inside the company), videoed my speech and put it online. It's only fair: Roo's in the book, so I've scrutinised him, and now he's scrutinised me.

It's a reversal happening more and more, in our new, connected, participatory culture: what began as dialling numbers to vote for bands (a pound being a small price to pay for the empty belief you are part of the creative process) has become a whole online culture of accountability, where politicians' statements are cross-checked against previous speeches ("You never said that? Well, here you are two years ago saying it"). Slowly, we're reclaiming a few small degrees of the power and connected strength that we sacrificed on our century-long journey into the primacy of the self.

Two days after the real book launch, my publishers arranged a virtual book launch, inside *Second Life*. Adam Boulton, political editor of Sky News, appeared by virtual proxy (actually he was in Germany – he, as they say, phoned it in).

Adam interviewed me and some other *Second Life* residents about the book. What was new about this launch was that some of the people I wrote about were there. The usual lay of the land in non-fiction is that the writer becomes the sole mediator of the reader's experience: few readers expect to meet the people they're reading about. What's exciting about the virtual terrain is that this kind of meeting has become easy.

Adam Boulton spoke with Simon Stevens, a real-world and *Second Life* disability activist (and club promoter) who I wrote about – a conversation that without virtual worlds would never have taken place. It seemed a fitting end to my journey: at a cafe by the sea, sipping non-existent virtual wine; new readers of the book in animated discussion with those who conspired with me to create it. I decided to leave my avatar, Errol, there.

Just as I needed a break from the real world when I first left it behind to journey online, I need a break from virtual worlds. In the same way Reginald Perrin left a pile of clothes on the sand, I've left my empty avatar by the sea. Like most of us now, I am disenchanted, and I have been suffering, and I am free.

Tim Guest's book about virtual worlds, Second Lives, is published by Hutchinson. Visit him at timguest.net



Illustration: tstakes

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

WII ON THE WANE?

In 2005, a group of presumably embittered, cynical and heart-broken doctors at an Italian university discovered it wasn't angels singing that caused people to fall in love, but an evolutionary, biochemical process.

A study of group of people 'in love' found that they had higher levels of neurotrophin proteins than people who were single. These nerve growth factor proteins can be responsible for feelings of euphoria, butterflies in the stomach and a strong desire to write stupid poems and put together soppy mix-tapes. The scientists discovered that after a year the neurotrophins begin to fade – coinciding with the end of what can be termed 'romantic love'.

We've all been there. We've all skipped hand-in-hand through fields during that first, year-long blooming, before realising what a terrible mistake we've made. Prior to that you're prepared to forgive all sorts: constant references to former lovers, endless picking of the nose, chewing with the mouth open, and a nagging suggestion that – perhaps – he or she isn't the most beautiful person in the world after all, but a bit plain and ordinary, with a hairy back.

Perhaps it isn't just people that it happens with, but items of consumer electronics too.

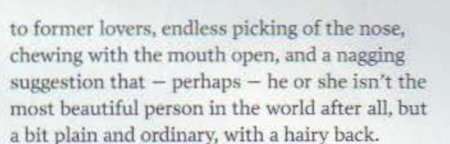
I've cut the Wii a lot of slack in this column over the past year and a bit, but the honeymoon is over. The tide of love has gone back out again, and I'm faced with the stark truth that maybe it isn't the perfect system that I'd once believed.

Before I begin, let's get one thing straight; I still think the Wii is the only must-have console out there. The Wii Remote is the biggest step forward in gaming since CD-ROM, and Nintendo has realised it brilliantly. In short, it's the only console that knows that consoles are – look away now, editors of gadget bibles featuring half-naked women on the cover – simply toys. They're not sophisticated entertainment hubs, or cool lifestyle accessories. They're something to play with.

Unfortunately, it would seem that I'm running out of ways to play with my Wii.

Nintendo has always sought to stagger its cornerstone releases in the well-intentioned belief that quality over quantity is better. That's all well and good if the gaps between the big games are bloated with decent titles from other publishers, but – let's be honest here – the Wii has very few triple-A games to its name, whether we're talking first or third party.

Yes, *Zelda*'s brilliant. Yes, we all love *WarioWare: Smooth Moves*. Yes, I'll still be playing *Wii Sports* at the end of time (or until they release *Wii Sports 2*: whichever is sooner). But what else is there on the Wii? They're mainly iffy multiformat releases with some bolted on, token gameplay element that works with the Wii Remote, or same-old licences. I can't believe there's anyone who got excited at the prospect of a Meet The Robinsons tie-in.



> Yes, Zelda's brilliant. Yes, we all love WarioWare. Yes, I'll still be playing Wii Sports at the end of time. But what else is there on Wii?

Admittedly, it's a problem that plagues most consoles in their first year, but – having browsed the release list for the rest of 2007 – it's not a problem I see being resolved any time soon. There are sackloads of games coming out on the 360 that I'm looking forward to, and even the PS3 has a handful of titles that look as if they'll be worth a play (although most of them will also be available on the 360).

The Wii desperately needs another triple-A title to squat alongside *Zelda*. However heavily they promote *Mario Strikers* or *Excite Truck*, Nintendo is never going to convince anyone that they're up there with the other all-time greats.

I'd argue that – more than nine months into the console's life – *Zelda* remains the only true classic, and every other potentially brilliant release is bottle-necked at the end of the year.

Super Mario Galaxy, *Metroid Prime 3* and *Super Paper Mario* have all been punted to the end of 2007 – if not beyond (based upon past experience) – and that's really your lot for big, exclusive Wii releases on the horizon.

I dare say part of the problem is thirdparty developers being slow to get their brains around the shift in emphasis ushered in by the Wii Remote. The PS3 may have clambered aboard the motion-sensing bandwagon, but the console is basically a tarted-up version of what came before. It's a format that developers can get their heads around, rather than having to experiment with a whole new way to play.

Nevertheless, even with this in mind, by now we should at least have some promising announcements. Instead: nothing. I've no idea if there's that oft-dreamed of Wii sword game in the works, or anything that capitalises on the potential hinted at in *Wii Play*, or *Smooth Moves*. I'm sure Nintendo has plenty of secret titles up its sleeves, but unless it starts throwing us a bone or two, we dogs are going to get fed up.

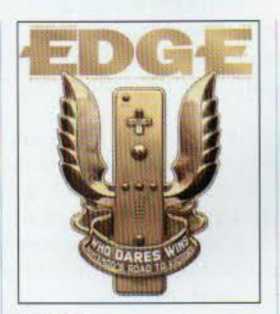
It speaks volumes that I've spent nearly as much on Virtual Console games as I have bona-fide Wii titles, and have spent almost as long playing with the Mii creator, or spinning the Forecast Channel globe, as I have on games.

I'll love Nintendo till I die, but however romantically blinkered I may be, I'm starting to feel a bit starved of affection.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television







Issue 177

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: Bioware Sonic RPG

A Sonic game taken out of Sega's hands? Christ, we might get a good 'un!
Diluted Dante

Anyone else find the notion of taking the famously nippy entry in the videogame hall of awesome and squashing it into a ponderous format disgraceful?
Mr. Brooks

I can't think of one franchise that needs killing more than Sonic.
JoJoeyJoJo

Concerning the Codeshop section of **E**177, I couldn't help think of the political overtures of being able to 'control videogames with your mind'. I myself am a gamer, and I personally think that the argument that 'violent games produces violent behaviour' is not true. When shooting aliens in the head in *Gears Of War*, I find myself enjoying it; I'm not in fact living out my deepest darkest fantasies, I'm simply relishing the challenge.

The idea of being able to control games with mind power is a phenomenal thought, something ripped out of science-fiction (indeed, Red Dwarf with its 'total reality gaming' created something akin); however, I can predict that politicians such as Jack Thompson will jump on this amazing new technology – the player is not simply pressing buttons, or swinging their arms around, they are thinking 'stab him', 'shoot him' and ultimately 'kill him'. When we are blurring the line between gaming and reality, would younger players playing the next generation of *Manhunt* begin to confuse them? Do age ratings and 'parental control' really work?

I'm looking forward to being able to try out this new technology for myself, but am worried that the political backlash will make developers wary of creating any fast-paced action game. Which would be an amazing leap forward in videogames.

James Ingram

The idea of being able to control games with mind power is a phenomenal thought; however, I can predict that Jack Thompson will jump on it

The case of *Manhunt 2* (see p22) clearly takes the videogame violence debate to a new level, not only because of its content but also because of how you interact with that content using new types of control (ie, on Wii). From the perspective of anti-violent-videogame campaigners, couldn't the removal of peripherals masquerading as deadly weapons be seen as progress?

And so the 'videogames as art' debate comes full circle, bringing it all back to violence and the manner in which it's executed, lest we be distracted by that most cumbersome of human traits: emotion. Why preoccupy yourself with quaint and moribund philosophical musings when there're enemies to be killed? Never mind the notion that the player's decision-making could actually work on a level beyond 'shall I or shan't I kill this person?'; to do so would be to contravene the sacred phases of videogame plot exposition as witnessed over the years, formulated as they are around that most tried and trusted of Hollywood structures, the goodies versus the baddies. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Having said that, perhaps there's room for compromise; perhaps the two concepts can be married successfully. How about *A Clockwork Orange: The Videogame*? The player has a gauge in the corner of the screen which fills up depending upon the manner in which they dispatch enemies – except, in this game, they're innocent civilians. The more ruthless and sadistic the method, the greater your gauge; but also, the more likely the police are going to come after you. Shall I throw the pram off the bypass? Oh, that's a tough one. Beat up the tramp? Decisions, decisions. Set against a landscape of social disintegration, littered with Burgess-inspired soundbites ("Viddy this, my droogs!" you shout in co-op multiplayer), it may sound like a variation on *GTA*, but it could be enough to convince those pretentious, complaining sods that games can amount to something more than just a touch of the old ultraviolence.

Andy Dilks



The best letter wins a DS Lite

Mmm. That may be enough about violence for one issue. Can we talk about something else? Perhaps not...

So, then, the Bishop of Manchester objects to the use of Manchester Cathedral in *Resistance: Fall Of Man*? I don't blame him. If Insomniac and Sony were required to seek permission before including the building in the game, then they're legally in the wrong and should seek to offer redress to the Church of England.

What I find worrying, however, is the way that the Church and the various media outlets that have reported the story, and the public's response to it. I'm not talking about the basic factual inaccuracies and the



tabloid hyperbole, either. What bothers me most is the way the Church and the media have collapsed the relatively straightforward legal issue and the much more complicated moral debate into a single anti-videogame argument.

On May 5, 2007, BBC1 broadcast an episode of Doctor Who in which a mutated monster is lured to the very top of Southwark Cathedral (although filming actually took place at Wells Cathedral in Somerset), only to be toppled by the Doctor's sonic-screwdriver-aided organ playing and sent to its death. The Church of England has thus far failed to complain about this, and one assumes they received a fee in return for permission to film there. Now, I'm not blind to the difference between the scenes in Doctor Who and *Resistance*, the latter is undoubtedly more violent in its presentation, but nonetheless, the Church of England's moral posturing on the issue borders on hypocrisy. It seems that it's actually quite all right to kill monsters (and let's not forget that killing is killing regardless of whether or not the viewer sees blood) in a place of religious worship – providing you do so in a clever manner and don't forget to fill the collection plate on your way out.

Aside from the CoE's double standards, the media's handling has been typically atrocious. Insomniac had valid creative reasons for wanting to include the cathedral in the game: it is one of many historic British landmarks featured, helping to give authenticity to their depiction of a post-apocalyptic Britain; it creates a thematic parallel with similar battles that occured during World War II; and finally, the dramatic juxtaposition of an unearthly enemy attacking something sacred to humanity illustrates the very nature of invasion. Of course, none of these reasons can absolve Insomniac and Sony from charges of insensitivity, but it would be nice if the ostensibly balanced media could at least acknowledge and attempt to understand the creative motivations behind the decision, especially as the Right Rev Nigel McCullough has at the time of writing been given free rein to accuse them of being 'sick' and portray the decision as a deliberate attempt to offend and attack the Church.



Craig Owens questions the Church of England's stance on the architectural content of PS3 FPS *Resistance: Fall Of Man*

What bothers me is the way the Church and the media have collapsed the legal issue and the moral debate into a single anti-videogame argument

Perhaps the issue that has bothered me most, however, is the way my non-gaming friends have responded to the story. They agreed, unhesitatingly, not only that Insomniac should have sought permission (which is fair enough), but also that the very presence of the cathedral in the game was unjustifiable. These people, all agnostic/atheist literature students who would vehemently defend Philip Pullman's right to deliberately attack religion in the His Dark Materials trilogy, suddenly take a moral high-ground when the Church is inadvertently offended by a videogame.

And that, of course, is why stories like this will continue to occur. As long as people refuse to consider videogames as equally worthy of the right to offend, and as equally capable of producing something creatively worthwhile despite that offence, they will continue to be an easy target.

Craig Owens

A reminder of the inalienable rights of creative endeavours – hey, within the boundaries of good taste, of course! – is well worth this month's DS. It may be a good idea, however, to avoid using it to recreate any, say, religious scenes in Pictochat.



Sara DeMatteo bemoans the lack of variety in videogame enemies, citing Remedy's *Max Payne* as a particular offender



Topic: What Summer Games Drought?

So I'm presented with another four new releases on my 360, three of which actually look all right, and there's still more to come. Even August has *Bioshock*, one of my most anticipated titles of the year. A game? In August?
ZeldaMindMelder

Does the annual games drought ever actually bother anyone? I've got a huge backlog of great games.
Evil Red Eye

When I was younger I didn't have the money anyway, now I don't have the time. Happy to finish the games I have. Come autumn/winter there'll be moans that there's too much coming out at once and there isn't time for it all... and then many of us will be stacking them up into next spring.
Pause

Topic: Blizzard's announcement of *StarCraft 2*

Korea's RTS fanatics rejoice, but at what cost? Blizzard have openly stated that they are developing *StarCraft 2* for their Korean fans. Skill will be required, so the rest of us might as well go home. How come they get a game tailor-made for their community?
Speedhaak

Money.
Sgt Rock

I believe they are the largest market for *StarCraft*.
paranoidandroid

I've actually watched a few *StarCraft* tournaments with Korean participants and I must say they are hardcore. 13 hours practice... a day?!
speedhaak

Good grief. No one ever said that *StarCraft 2* is being specifically tailored to appease the hardcore South Korean market, so calm down. And, anyway, not every *StarCraft* player in South Korea is some unbeatable pro-gamer robot – there are lots of ordinary players just looking for a good game, just as you are.
Kiigan

Zergling rush for the win!
NMD

I just gunned down 100 men and thought nothing of it. These weren't stormtroopers; not nameless, masked men whose faces were hidden from me. No, these men were supposed to be human, and I could see their faces. But after the umpteenth enemy I gunned down in *Max Payne*, *Rainbow Six Vegas*, *Call Of Duty* or any other action game, I realised there wasn't a difference. When I turned a corner and put the barrel of a shotgun in the face of some grunt, he wasn't scared; he wasn't even surprised. In fact, he showed absolutely no emotion as I blew him away. Why is this?

If I play *Half-Life 2*, I'm able to see the incredible range of feelings Alyx Vance can convey. As the game goes on, one gets increasingly attached to these characters as they would in a movie or a book. However, these ordinary grunts may as well be wearing hockey masks, because they're not even acting human! During a heated firefight, these 'people' will run around spouting pointless phrases like "flank him", "I need covering fire" or "he's reloading". These sayings (that usually have no effect on the behavior of the AI) are an attempt to add humanity to these moving targets, but if those enemies don't show any expression, then what's the point?

It's because of this lack of human quality that I've had no problem killing a small nation's worth of soldiers, aliens, terrorists or whatever these games throw at me, but is that right? Why should our adversaries be portrayed as faceless targets, while our allies are given personality? But in the end, I guess I will just have to wait, and keep hoping that the

Continued

ordinary cannon fodder will eventually get the credit he or she deserves as an integral part of the game.
Sara DeMatteo

Traditionally, of course, the uniform appearance of enemy types has often been down to resources – not so much creating them (although that is an issue itself) but in terms of getting them to the screen. On platforms such as 360, PS3 and of course PC this should be less of an issue, however. Who will take the initiative? (We have to ask, though: how many of the hundreds of grunts blown away by one of Arnold Schwarzenegger's action heroes in their pomp would you actually recognise at a second glance?)

I notice that Media Molecule are trying to retro-fit an acronym to the editor for *LittleBigPlanet* that they have christened POPPET [see E174]. Might I suggest the following:



Topic: A columnist's hysteria about her child's addiction to The Sims

I've never played *The Sims* but it is cause for concern when nothing else matters but the game your child is playing. Forgetting to even eat!
Chilly Willy

The columnist's just discovered that sensible parenting may be a key factor in preventing your kid from becoming a psychopathic, delinquent videogame-junkie.
igorgetmeabrain

Someone buy this child *Football Manager*. Then he'll really be in business.
shanyi

Player **O**perated **P**ersonal **P**latform **E**diting **T**ool
Platforms, **O**bjects, **P**layer. **P**roprietary **E**diting **T**oolset
Player **OP**erated **P**rofessional **E**ntertaintainment **T**oybox
James Garratt

We can see the first one ending up being pretty close to the final choice. What about Please Observe Puppet Physics Enervating Toyland? Or how about PAPA instead? Please Avoid Post-Acronyms?

I've recently been reading Matt Fox's The Video Games Guide and I've been getting something from it that I don't get with **Edge**. That feeling of personal connection with an individual that's passionate about games.

Now, I don't doubt that **Edge** writers are passionate about games, but we don't know them as individuals – we know them as a collective. An amorphous entity.

Why not print the reviewer's name next to their pieces, and then we can begin to connect with them as fellow human beings; understand their likes and dislikes, idiosyncrasies and personal peccadillos?

So, come on, oh great Oz, why not let your writers out from behind the curtain in Emerald City so we can get to know them better?
B Jacklin

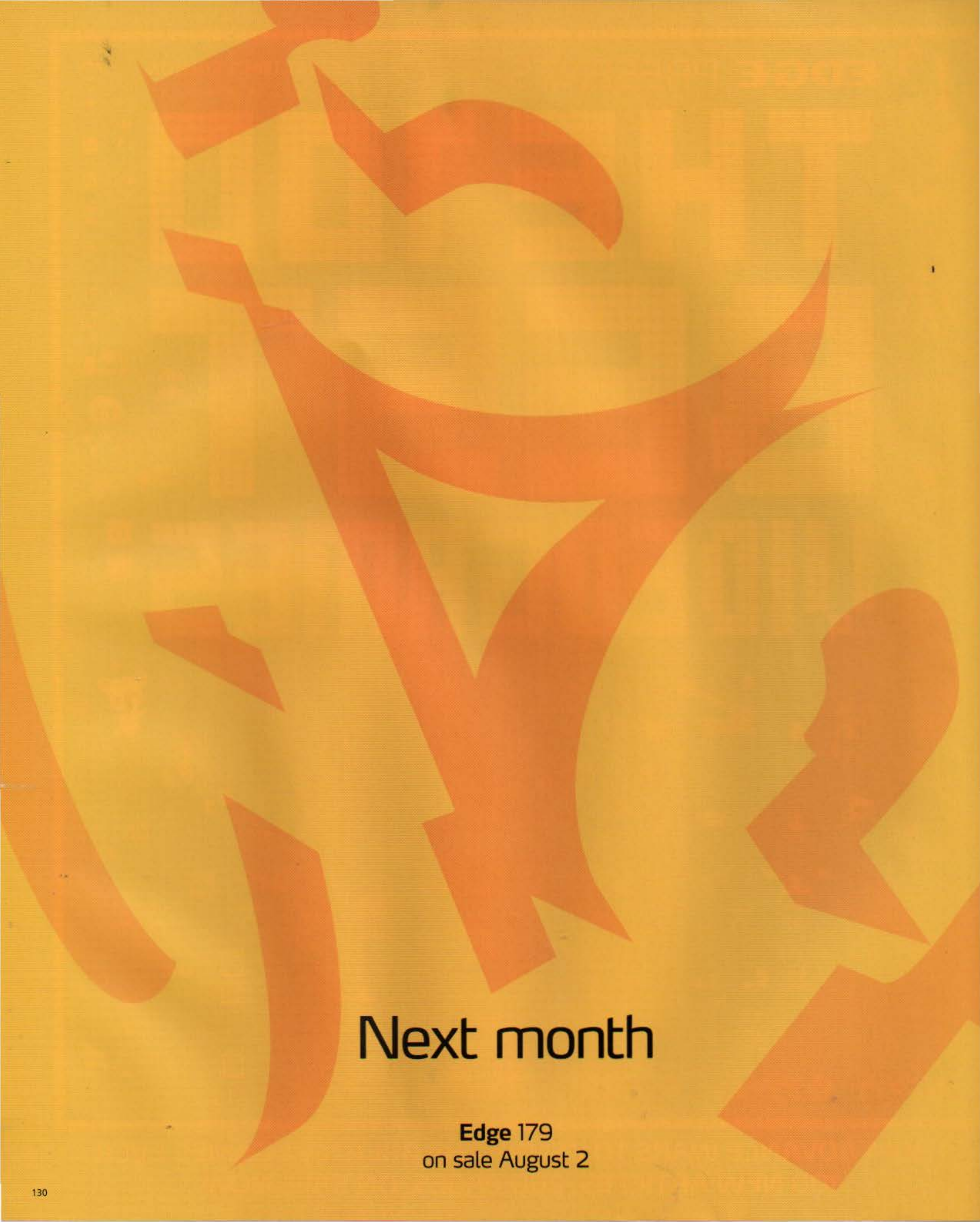
We'll give you a heart, a brain or some courage. As for personal peccadillos, unfortunately we too have to bow to censorship issues.

Send us email **(edge@futurenet.co.uk)**, but be sure to use 'Inbox' as the subject line. Or send a letter to this address: Inbox, **Edge**, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW

Inbox

Crashlander
BY JAMES HUTCHINSON
THAT'S ODD. I THOUGHT THERE'D BE MORE PEOPLE AROUND...
MAYBE I'M JUST HERE EARLY.
NO HARM IN THAT, THOUGH. WE ALL SAW THE LINES LAST YEAR.
HELLO!
HELLO!
HELLO!
HELLO!
IF YOU ARE OUT THERE...
IF ANYONE IS OUT THERE...
PLEASE.
JESUS, AT LEAST WILL SMITH HAD A DOG TO TALK TO.
MEDIA & BUSINESS SUMMIT
JULY 11-13 2007

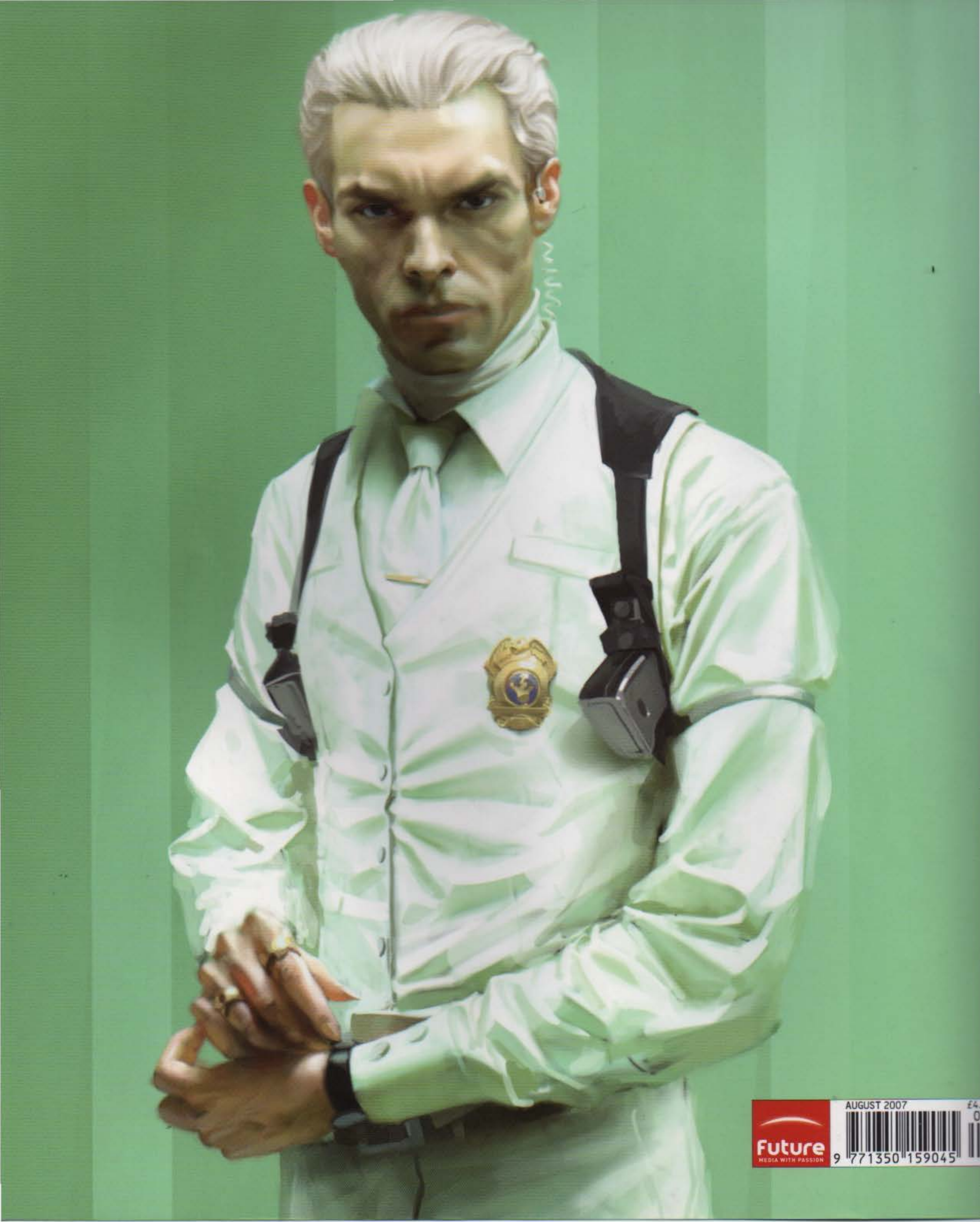
Visit the Crashlander archive at www.crashlander.com/edge



Next month

Edge 179
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